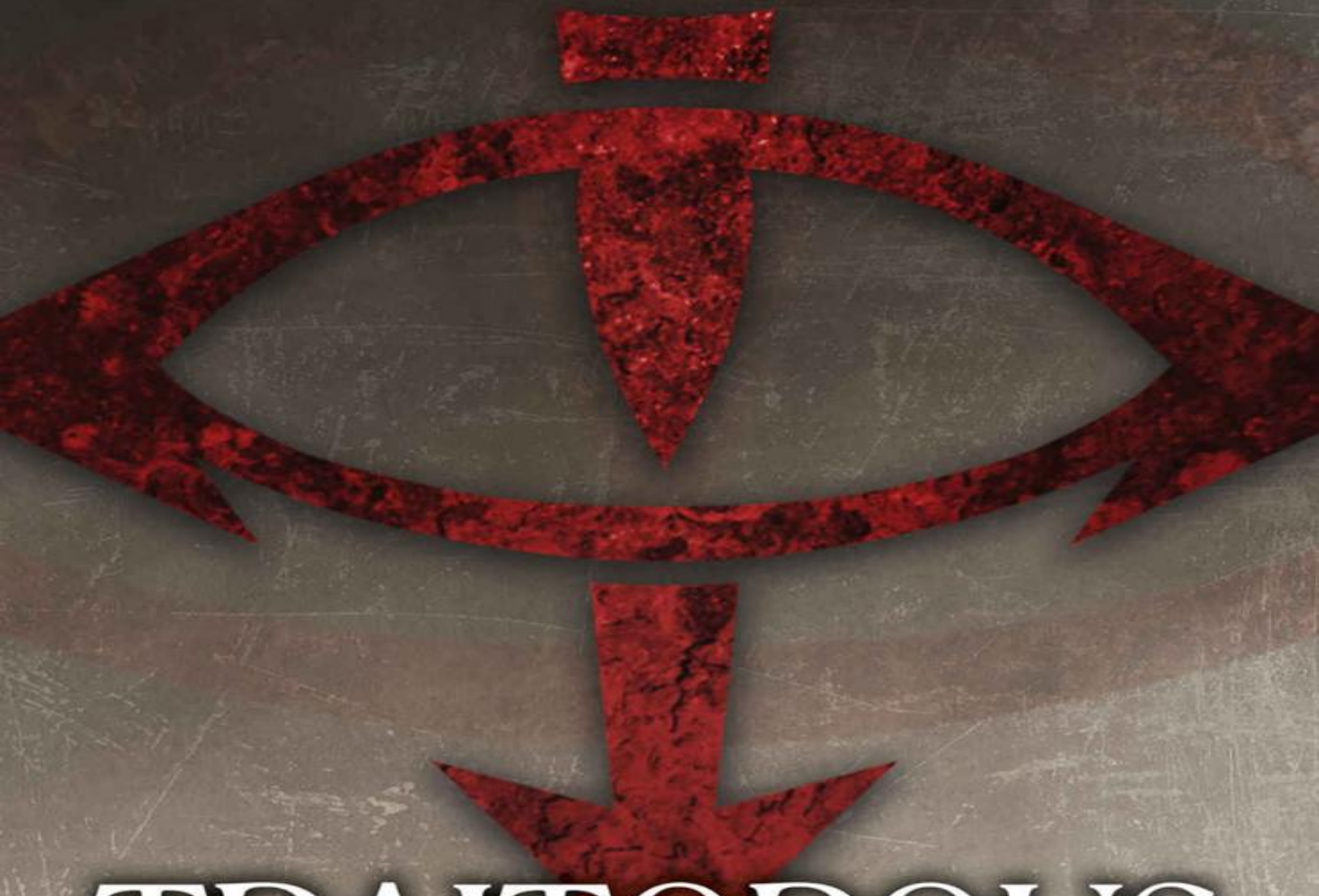
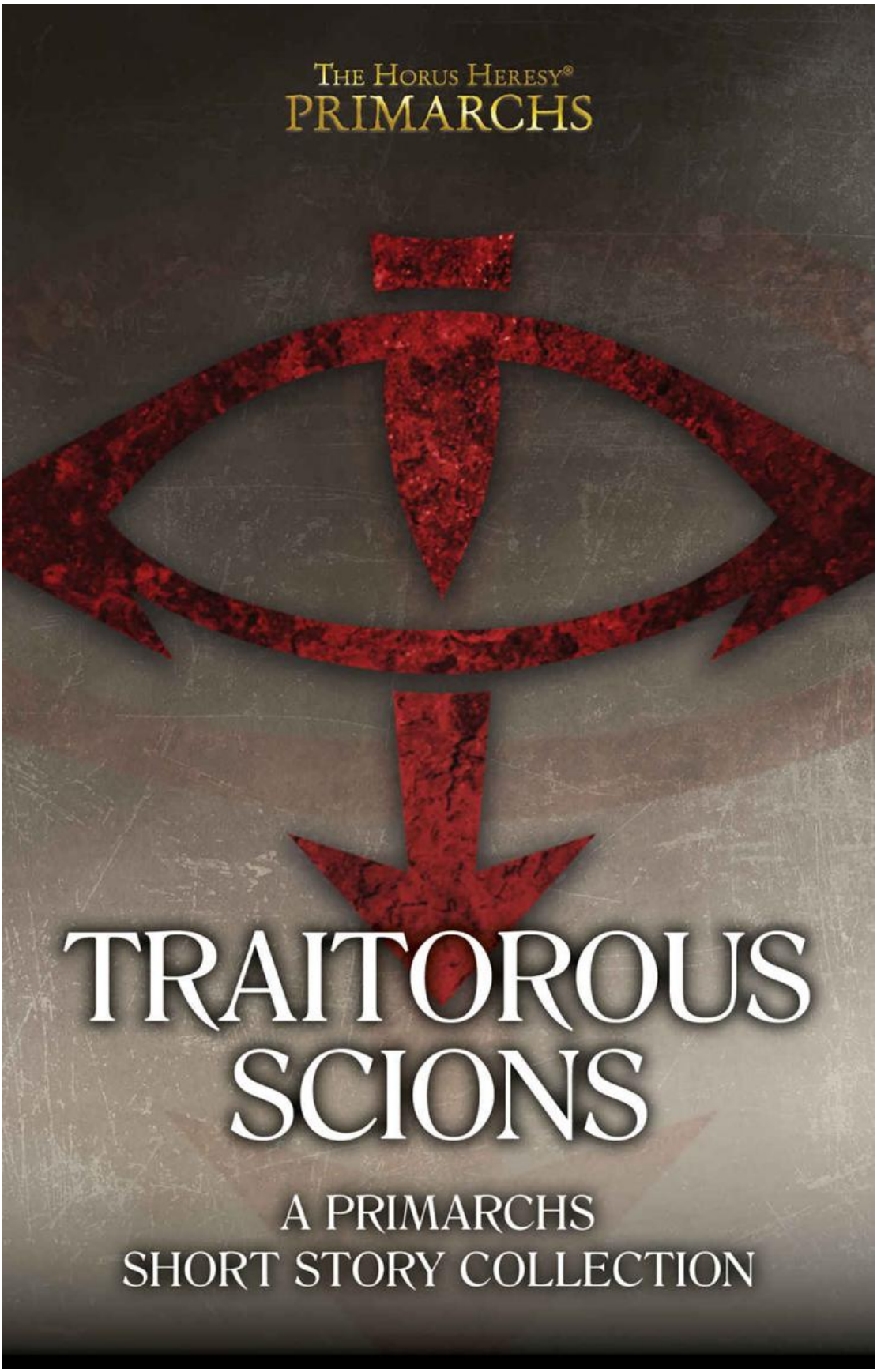
THE HORUS HERESY®
PRIMARCHS



# TRAITOROUS SCIONS

A PRIMARCHS
SHORT STORY COLLECTION


THE HORUS HERESY®
PRIMARCHS
TRAITOROUS SCIONS
A PRIMARCHS SHORT STORY COLLECTION

OceanofPDF.com

***The Primarchs***

**ALPHARIUS: HEAD OF THE HYDRA**
*Mike Brooks*

**LION EL'JONSON: LORD OF THE FIRST**
*David Guymer*

**KONRAD CURZE: THE NIGHT HAUNTER**
*Guy Haley*

**ANGRON: SLAVE OF NUCERIA**
*Ian St. Martin*

**CORAX: LORD OF SHADOWS**
*Guy Haley*

**VULKAN: LORD OF DRAKES**
*David Annandale*

**JAGHATAI KHAN: WARHAWK OF CHOGORIS**
*Chris Wraight*

**FERRUS MANUS: GORGON OF MEDUSA**
*David Guymer*

**FULGRIM: THE PALATINE PHOENIX**
*Josh Reynolds*

**LORGAR: BEARER OF THE WORD**
*Gav Thorpe*

**PERTURABO: THE HAMMER OF OLYMPIA**
*Guy Haley*

**MAGNUS THE RED: MASTER OF PROSPERO**
*Graham McNeill*

**LEMAN RUSS: THE GREAT WOLF**
*Chris Wraight*

**ROBOUTE GUILLIMAN: LORD OF ULTRAMAR**

*David Annandale*

***Also available***

**KONRAD CURZE: A LESSON IN DARKNESS**
*Ian St. Martin* (audio drama)

**SONS OF THE EMPEROR**
*Various authors*

**SCIONS OF THE EMPEROR**
*Various authors*

**BLOOD OF THE EMPEROR**
*Various authors*

*OceanofPDF.com*

# CONTENTS

Cover
Backlist
Title Page
The Horus Heresy
PRINCE OF BLOOD
CHILD OF CHAOS
GRANDFATHER'S GIFT
LANTERN'S LIGHT
LUPUS DAEMONIS
THE SIXTH CULT OF THE DENIED
COUNCIL OF TRUTH
TERMINUS
THE ABYSSAL EDGE
THE EMPEROR'S ARCHITECT
THE ANCIENT AWAITS
MISBEGOTTEN
THE VERDICT OF THE SCYTHE
THE CONQUEROR'S TRUTH
About the Authors
An Extract from 'The Solar War'
A Black Library Publication

*OceanofPDF.com*

THE HORUS HERESY®
PRIMARCHS

# TRAITOROUS SCIONS

A COLLECTION

L J GOULDING, CHRIS WRAIGHT, GUY HALEY,
JAMES SWALLOW, GRAHAM McNEILL,
DAVID GUYMER, MIKE BROOKS,
AARON DEMBSKI-BOWDEN, DAN ABNETT,
DAVID ANNANDALE & GAV THORPE

BLACK LIBRARY

OceanofPDF.com

**THE HORUS HERESY**

***It is a time of legend.***

**Mighty heroes battle for the right to rule the galaxy. The vast armies of the Emperor of Mankind conquer the stars in a Great Crusade – the myriad alien races are to be smashed by his elite warriors and wiped from the face of history.**

**The dawn of a new age of supremacy for humanity beckons. Gleaming citadels of marble and gold celebrate the many victories of the Emperor, as system after system is brought back under his control. Triumphs are raised on a million worlds to record the epic deeds of his most powerful champions.**

**First and foremost amongst these are the primarchs, superhuman beings who have led the Space Marine Legions in campaign after campaign. They are unstoppable and magnificent, the pinnacle of the Emperor's genetic experimentation, while the Space Marines themselves are the mightiest human warriors the galaxy has ever known, each capable of besting a hundred normal men or more in combat.**

**Many are the tales told of these legendary beings. From the halls of the Imperial Palace on Terra to the outermost reaches of Ultima Segmentum, their deeds are known to be shaping the very future of the galaxy. But can such souls remain free of doubt and corruption forever? Or will the temptation of greater power prove too much for even the most loyal sons of the Emperor?**

**The seeds of heresy have already been sown, and the start of the greatest war in the history of mankind is but a few years away...**

*OceanofPDF.com*

# PRINCE OF BLOOD

L J Goulding

*OceanofPDF.com*

*‘I am in blood. Stepp’d in so far that, should I wade no more,*
*Returning were as tedious as go o’er.’*

– attributed to the Nameless Thane of Old Albia

The flagship was trying to kill them. There could be no other explanation.

Blearily, Lotara eyed the canteen that rested upon the arm of her command throne, thirst making her tongue fat and heavy in her mouth. She shook the tiny silver pillbox in her hand absently, and her last few analgesic tabs rattled within it. Her headache was a sharp, grinding reminder that she hadn’t taken any liquid in nearly two days.

And, of course, she had nothing to wash the painkillers down.

The *Conqueror* was surely trying to kill them.

Her ship. Angron’s ship.

Angron’s prison.

Her first officer circled around behind the raised dais. Where once Ivar Tobin had been a model example of the Legions’ naval officer class, now he would regularly pace the deck with the nervous agitation of an addict, his brow dull with dry, cold sweat.

He halted abruptly, covering his earpiece with one hand. ‘The door is sealed from the inside, ma’am. They are sending for a cutter. Still no contact with Mistress Andrasta, or her attendants.’

Lotara frowned. Her thoughts continued to drift.

The bridge space felt stiflingly warm, though that was likely just another effect of the dehydration. The crew preferred to keep the lighting low, because the lumen sconces had begun to flicker randomly and buzz like angry hornets, and even the most void-seasoned among them could not last a whole watch without suffering migraines or waking nightmares. Lotara herself had ordered the air cycler vents blocked up, in an effort to keep out the slaughterhouse reek that clung to every fibre of their uniforms. In a space designed for three hundred souls and more, barely sixty had reported for duty that night, and many of them were red-eyed and stripped down to their stained fatigues. A few were sprawled at their posts, sleeping fitfully.

There was little she could do about that, beyond hauling them down to the brig one by one with her own two weary hands, and hammering on the doors of every bunkroom to find suitable replacements. All of her slavers – no, *discipline masters*, she corrected herself – were engaged elsewhere on the ship. The *Conqueror* had to keep moving, and her engines were thirstier even than her crew.

Tobin straightened, staring blankly past his commanding officer like a grimy parade-ground recruit. It was his new way of reminding her of her duty, her superior rank, without actually saying a word, and it irritated her immensely.

‘Ma’am… You might ask the good captain to intervene,’ he offered. ‘Send a legionary or two down to the Navigator’s chambers, perhaps? We’re losing pace with the *Trisagion* and the rest of the Word Bearers fleet, and Lord Aurelian’s patience is not without its limits.’ Tobin paused just long enough to make it seem as though he might be waiting for an answer, then addressed the warrior directly. ‘My lord, what say you?’

Khârn was the only legionary on the bridge, though that was nothing unusual. He stood, as he so often did, in the open space to the left of the dais, swaying slightly and pressing at his temples with raw knuckles. Lotara knew that his headaches were far more fierce than hers could ever be, worse still when they sailed the tides of the warp as the fleet did now, and nothing whatsoever to do with the amount of water in his bloodstream. She didn’t remember him coming through the main doors, but he’d clearly been in the

process of shedding his battleplate when the pain had driven him to start roaming the corridors of the flagship once again. The warrior's left arm was bare, and his right gauntlet hung from his belt.

He murmured a reply from between clenched teeth. He did not open his eyes, nor turn to face them, but continued to knead his scalp.

Tobin raised an eyebrow. 'My lord?'

'They called my father the Lord of the Red Sands…' he repeated, more loudly. A spasm flickered in his bicep, the outward sign of some deeper neural twitch.

Lotara glared at him. She attempted to swallow three times before she could actually manage to croak a reply.

'We all did.'

She rarely bothered to address him by name or rank any more. He didn't seem to notice.

'He was the Undefeated,' Khârn continued. 'His triumph rope grew long. He became the Slaughterer of Nations. The Eater of Cities, and then of Worlds, with us at his side. Some even dared to know him as "the Red Angel".'

As if in response, the ship creaked and juddered. It was like a leviathan stirring in its sleep, drifting on the unseen currents of the aether beyond the shuttered viewports. Lotara rose unsteadily to her feet, sparing a concerned glance for the static-crazed oculus high overhead. She often felt that she did not know whether her once prized vessel was still ev–

Khârn whirled around, catching her in mid-step and making Tobin flinch. His face was contorted almost into the likeness of the Sarum-pattern helm he so favoured.

'Those are not his names!' he hissed, his eyes flashing in the dim light, and she could smell his rancid, unwashed transhuman stink. 'None of them. My father's name is Angron. That is all he has left.'

An awkwardly long moment passed between them. Khârn held the sleeve of Lotara's dress tunic with one increasingly shaky hand, but she kept his gaze. Tobin continued to stare past them both, pretending he couldn't see any of it.

Then the legionary's eyes fell to the Red Hand emblazoned on her chest – the untidy print that he himself had made in honour of her exemplary service, what now felt like a lifetime ago. His resolve seemed to melt away, and he turned his back on her once more.

‘You should just drink it,’ he muttered. ‘You’ll hardly even notice the taste after a while.’

She made to smooth out the wrinkles in her uniform, but found that she couldn’t see any point. Instead, she picked up the canteen, unscrewed the top, and poured the contents out onto the deck.

‘I won’t do that, Khârn. You know I won’t do that.’

It was blood.

In some grim parody of the ancient Terran faiths, the *Conqueror* turned every drop of water they could reclaim into thick, sticky, slowly clotting blood.

The warriors of the Legion seemed content to gulp it down when they had no alternative – especially the primarch’s Devourers – though it heightened their manias, their rages and rivalries, and led to more deaths than usual in the fighting pits.

But it simply made the human crew sick. Of course it made them sick, even those most keen to impress their legionary masters. It was *blood*…

Was this what Angron wanted? It was impossible for anyone, even Khârn, to say.

Lotara’s gorge rose, and she realised she was becoming dizzy with the effort of standing. She let the canteen slip from her fingers, still gently shaking the tiny pillbox in her other hand, and trying to think of something to say about the separation between men and beasts. But the words simply wouldn’t come together in her foggy thoughts.

And that was when the warp rejected them.

Khârn evidently noticed something amiss in the split second before it happened, his head snapping around as he dropped into a reflexive, guarded crouch.

Then Lotara felt it – the dislocating reverse-yawn of an unexpected warp translation, *the instant drawn out into eternity but crushed back to an instant against its will, the cold slither of the warp retreating from the hull, Geller fields straining with the almost infinite deceleration between the immaterium and reality…*

The deck lurched. Sirens and alarms sounded. Lotara reeled, but kept her footing even in the slick of spilled blood. The older Tobin was not so nimble, and their skulls cracked together as he tripped over the corner of the dais. She fell, bright motes swimming at the corners of her vision, letting out a pained gasp an instant before her shoulder hit the metal-plated floor.

To their credit, and dazed as they were, the helm officers managed to bring the slewing motion of the stricken *Conqueror* under control as it tumbled back into real space.

His combat reflexes still heightened, Khârn glanced down at her.

He cocked his head. ‘What–’

Another vessel, perhaps the escort frigate *Metzgerei*, slammed into the flagship’s aft quarter.

The *Conqueror* howled in pain.

Khârn was hurled from his feet by the impact. Lotara saw him collide head first with the standing crystalflex pane of a fighter-patrol tactical display, shattering it instantly. Tobin went skidding in the same direction across the deck, and tumbled down into the starboard sensorium bay.

The lumens blinked out across the bridge. The acrid stench of an unseen electrical fire quickly filled the air. Servitors spewed garbled half-words, their machine brains moving a few milliseconds faster than their augmitters could manage. Someone was screaming. A secondary explosion rocked the hull, probably a detonation in one of the lesser magazines.

Decompression warning beacons strobed in the enclosed space. The ship’s superstructure groaned as it shrugged off the collision and limped clear of the growing debris field.

Lotara’s ears were ringing. She couldn’t tell where the deck alarms ended and her tinnitus began but, thankfully enough, it was drowning out the screams. Rolling onto all fours, smearing her uniform red in the process, she managed to scan the space around the command throne.

Her mouth fell open.

It was Khârn. He was on his knees.

He was screaming.

With one hand the captain clutched at the ruin of his face; it was little more than a wet, crimson flap hanging from his left eye socket to the open slash of his mouth. Teeth, gums and cheekbone glinted back from the bloody mess, under the bridge’s emergency lighting.

With the other hand, he gripped what was left of Ivar Tobin by the neck.

In his insensible agony, Khârn had torn the man apart.

*They called my father the Lord of the Red Sands. For a time, they loved him.*

*He was the Undefeated. His triumph rope grew long. He became the*

*Slaughterer of Nations. The Eater of Cities, and then of Worlds, with us at his side. Some even dared to know him as ‘the Red Angel’…*

*But those are not his names. None of them. He was little more than a slave who became a butcher, but a butcher who was crowned a primarch, and a primarch who was turned into a monster.*

*In spite of it all, we loved him too. For a time.*

*My father’s name is Angron. In these increasingly rare moments of clarity, between the blood-rages and the infinities of pain that seem to burn his skull from the inside out, the name of Angron is all that he has left. That and nothing more, for I suspect he no longer recognises the creature he sees reflected in the pools of spilled blood around the creaking, shifting throne that we built for him.*

*We have only his pious, self-righteous brother Lorgar to thank for that.*

*And one day, we will.*

*Blood. Drink it down. The taste is…*

*Once Terra has burned and the Warmaster’s claim to the Throne proven just, the XII Legion will festoon the new Imperium with the skulls of Lorgar’s sons, the treacherous Word Bearers. We will kill them, maim them, and burn what remains. Perhaps then, our father can find some small measure of peace to carry him through eternity.*

*Am I like him? Do we walk the same path?*

*Maybe. I know that I am marked by… something.*

*Its eye is upon me, the same sleepless and unwavering eye that has watched my father all his life, no doubt. I can feel its malignant glare, burning unseen in the heavens with the intensity of a supernova, the eightfold heat washing through the base of my skull, prickling the flesh between my shoulders whenever I rest, the echoes of its half-remembered name ringing inside of my skull.*

*It watches everything. It sees all that I am, and everything I can never be.*

*Khârn. Khârn. Khârn. Betrayed.*

*Kill them. Maim them.*

*Would that I were judged for my atrocities. I could answer to those in a heartbeat, and spit upon any who would say that a legionary’s rightful role is not that of an attack dog.*

*Rather, I know that I am to be condemned for whatever vestige of mercy and sane thought I can still muster, when the killing is done and the Butcher’s Nails are sated. Such things as ‘mercy’ and ‘sanity’ are of no*

*interest to whatever it is that lurks beyond.*

*And peace for my father's soul is not something that concerns it one bit.*

*Burn them. Burn them.*

*The darkness retreats. The brain-fire cools. What–*

*Blood.*

*Blood, and pain, and nothing more.*

The XII Legion fleet closed around its foundering leader, for the most part. The *Conqueror*'s principal battlegroup had prepared to break from the warp as soon as they detected the fluctuations in her engine patterns – with the exception of the *Metzgerei*, whose prow was shattered, they made a relatively ordered translation and fell into a standard picket around the Gloriana-class beast. Other groups, those of the *Red Hound*, the *Merciless* and the *Rohimnal* in particular, continued their voyage for an hour or more before realising that anything out of the ordinary had even transpired, and were forced to double back.

Several other ships powered on into the aether, heedlessly. Whether they intended to keep pace with the Word Bearers or had decided to carve out their own destinies elsewhere in Ultima Segmentum, it was impossible to tell.

'Hang the lot of them,' Lotara muttered under her breath, reaching an unmarked hallway junction. 'Let the disobedient curs lose themselves and call it freedom.'

She paused to orient herself. The agreed dock was one of three in this low section, and it rarely saw any traffic other than inter-group supply runs. She punched the number she had scribbled on the back of her hand into the keypad beneath a dead manifest screen, then cleared her throat and composed herself as best she could.

Truth be told, it was Lorgar's flight that troubled her more. The *Trisagion* and the *Blessed Lady* had not even paused when the *Conqueror* dropped out of the warp. A single crimson-hulled destroyer, its name purposefully blanked on auspex data returns, emerged only minutes after the collision, circled the picket once with gun ports open, then jumped away again. No vessel of the World Eaters had been able to raise the XVII on any medium- or long-range vox in all the hours since, nor had their astropathic calls received any kind of reply.

It was clear enough that the Word Bearers had deliberately abandoned

them.

The heavy pneumatics of the voidlock hatch squealed as it opened before her, to reveal a handful of armsmen from the battle-barge *Scathlocke*, descending the ramp of their shuttlecraft. She was somewhat relieved to find they looked as disorganised and slovenly as her own crew, but received their half-hearted salutes with as stern a glare as she could manage.

Advancing somewhat cautiously, they moved aside to reveal their charges: a most peculiar specimen of a man, with a gaggle of courtly sycophants fawning about him.

‘Shipmistress Sarrin,’ he said, ambling forwards with his astrolabe staff. ‘You bring none of the Legion to greet us, on board the flagship?’

He was tall and wiry, bedecked in an outrageously long brocaded coat, tailored to make him look taller still. A velvet cap was pulled low over his brow. He stood a moment and peered down his nose at Lotara, sipping from a silver flask while his attendants whispered deviously to one another.

She wondered how long it would be before the contents of that flask, too, would redden.

‘That’s Flag-Captain Sarrin, good sir,’ she replied, clicking her tongue. ‘There is another master of this ship. You may have heard of him.’

The man nodded in contrition. ‘Forgive me, flag-captain. We mean no disrespect. We are Navis Scion Ramosz, of the House Tevu.’

‘What, all four of you?’

Ramosz’s lip curled. ‘We… We would be most honoured to answer Lord Angron’s summons, and offer our services aboard the mighty *Conqueror*. We are merely surprised that not even any of his centurions deign to present themselves at this momentous occasion. The fickle and unreliable House Andrasta have failed the Twelfth Legion, and the primarch, and the Warmaster’s new Imperium, for the final time, and House Tevu will–’

Lotara stepped aside, inviting him onto the ship with little more than a sigh and a shrug.

‘A word of advice, sir,’ she said. ‘I’d keep all those sorts of thoughts to yourself.’

Somewhat deflated, the Navigator reached the end of the ramp, but halted suddenly as his foot touched the deck beneath it. He shivered, his skin paling, and his attendants pawed at his coat sleeves in concern.

‘Oh, this is a strange thing,’ he murmured. ‘A strange thing indeed.’

‘Sir?’

Ramosz gripped his staff tightly. He took another step. ‘The *Conqueror* is… She is not as we remember her. There is… something else… here. We can feel it all around, even in her iron bones. It thirsts for blood, truly, and it yearns… to be… free. And it does not like us.’

He pulled a worn lace handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at the sides of his neck.

‘No, it does not like us one bit.’

One of the armsmen had lit up a lho-stick in the empty corridor beyond the hatch. Lotara slapped it out of his mouth as she passed.

‘Just wait until you meet Khârn,’ she called over her shoulder. ‘He’s going to hate you too.’

Ramosz and his coterie struggled to keep up with her, though the swaggering guards fell into an easy step around them all, cradling their las-carbines with the safeties off. Occasionally, she would see a dejected crewmember or Legion serf steal a look at them from up ahead, before darting back into the shadows. The *Conqueror* continued to grumble and groan around them – back here, closer to the midship battery sections, it sounded disconcertingly like a vast, empty stomach.

Lotara held out a hand and Ramosz duly supplied her with his flask. She was disappointed not to taste the cool water she so longed for, but some manner of decadent, spiced wine.

*For now, at least.*

‘I’d like to tell you that you will get used to that uneasy feeling you describe,’ she sighed. ‘But you won’t. Take solace from the fact that you’ll be somewhat shielded from it, in the Navigator chambers. I gather they are most comfortable.’

They passed a corpse sprawled out on the deck plates. The young man had been dead for some weeks, and his tattered uniform had been stripped of all rank and insignia pins. His sidearm was also missing, and so too were his boots.

Ramosz covered his mouth. His attendants were completely silent for the first time since they had arrived.

Lotara handed back the flask. ‘Apologies. Our maintenance crews are…’

She couldn’t summon the effort to finish the excuse.

Thankfully, it was not more than nine conveyor-less levels back up to the ordnance bay where the medicae triage station had been established. As

they rounded the corner of a doubleback intersection leading into it, the first two armsmen faltered in their stride, and a startled whimper came from one of the Navigator’s retinue.

A legionary stood guard in the wide doorway. He held two notched axes, loose and ready, and his once white battleplate was stained with old blood and other, less savoury filth. He wore a tabard of mail, and a trio of woefully small skulls hung from his belt.

The warrior did not move to block Lotara, nor any of the mortals accompanying her. He merely glared down at them through cold, emerald-green eye-lenses, shifting his weight slowly from foot to foot, his breath audible through the vox-grille of his helm.

Casualty estimates from the collision varied, since there were no solid numbers for the flagship’s current crew, and there were certainly too few to mount any sort of organised sweep of the most heavily damaged areas. The compartments that had suffered full decompression had been automatically sealed off, and Lotara was forced to concede that they would likely remain that way for some time. She had seen for herself the void-frosted bodies on the other side of the internal bulkhead viewports.

Even so, there were scores of bodies here too.

Many had been bagged. But when the bags ran out, they had been covered with stripped tunics, or cargo tarps, or whatever else came to hand. The deck drains ran dark red – now a fairly common spectacle at any place on the ship – and the few medicae adepts that remained looked more like apprentice butchers.

Khârn, thankfully, was being tended to. The Apothecary, Kargos, was squatting on his armoured chest, stapling his face back together.

It had taken a while to subdue him. His frenzy claimed two more of the bridge crew before any legionaries had arrived to help, and Kargos hit him with enough tranq to kill an ogryn. When Khârn regained consciousness almost two hours later, he was surprisingly coherent, and remembered nothing of any of it.

Lotara wasn’t sure if it was still entirely necessary, but the captain’s arms were being held down by that leering, pallid ghoul Skane and one of his Destroyer squad. The sergeant looked up at her and grinned; he probably intended it to be shark-like, but she could see more empty gums than teeth, and sharks were not known to drool.

‘Flag-captain,’ he wheezed, straining his augmetic vocal cords. ‘We’re

trying to decide who it was that gave him these new scars – the helmsman on the *Metzgerei*, or your Navigator. Well, *former* Navigator. I don't recall anyone ever cutting his face before, not even in the fighting pits. It's worth noting. There might yet be a score to settle.'

Lotara didn't respond. She was used to seeing Khârn covered in blood, but it tended to appear brighter and more unsettling whenever it was mostly his own.

She turned. Ramosz and his gaggle of attendants were all staring hard at their own feet.

'Khârn,' she called out. 'He's here.'

The reply she got was nothing more than a questioning grunt. Lotara waved Ramosz forwards.

'Chief Navigator from the *Scathlocke*. He's House Tevu. No blood ties to Andrasta that we could find.'

Ramosz bowed deeply, even lowering his astrolabe. 'Lord, we are honoured to serve you and the primarch. Doubtless you have no reason to recall such a trifle, but we were a member of Mistress Nisha's retinue for a while, some years back.'

Khârn growled. 'Don't say her name again. That weak-willed bitch.'

Pausing to give Ramosz a pointed, sidelong glance, Lotara prepared to dig her heels in once again. 'He's the best chance we've got. No one else comes close, not for guiding a Gloriana.'

To her surprise, there was no further protest, but Khârn shifted in agitation beneath the Apothecary's weight.

'Aren't you done? Get off me, Bloodspitter. Get off me now.'

Kargos pushed himself to his feet, wiping his tools on the back of one leather gauntlet, while the two Destroyers moved to haul the reluctant patient up.

'Arise, Khârn the Bloody!' Skane chuckled, clapping him on the pauldron. 'May you–'

Khârn felled the sergeant with a single, barehanded blow to the side of the head, sending him crashing into an empty shell hoist cart. No one said anything for a long moment.

'Where are we?' the captain demanded. His face was puffy and raw around the rough metal fastenings, his left eye half closed and bloodshot. 'You. Navigator. Can you tell me that, at least?'

Ramosz still would not look up. 'We have been comparing the fleet's

position against the cartae, lord. We believe this to be somewhere at the periphery of the Ruthan Marches. Beyond the range of local system scrying, certainly.'

'Ruthan. One of Dorn's conquests. Should we expect a Seventh Legion presence?'

'Unlikely,' Lotara replied. 'There have been few reports of them operating outside the Segmentum Solar in years, so I doubt we'll face them until we reach the Throneworld. Assuming that's still our plan.'

The ship juddered softly beneath their feet. Casting a cursory glance over the rows of bodies in the chamber, Khârn turned and made to leave, without ceremony. 'Have all of these incinerated. Don't bother with funerary rites. And get our new Navigator installed immediately. We must be ready.'

'Ready for what? Lord Aurelian was orchestrating our combined attacks from system to system, and now he is gone. We have no target.'

'I do not need Lorgar's permission to make war,' Khârn spat, stepping over Skane's unconscious form. 'We are on our own now, Lotara. We will serve our own primarch. No other.'

She nodded wearily, re-tying her lank hair behind her head. 'So, where are you going?'

'Time is running short. It has been more than a month since we spilled an enemy's blood. Should I tell Angron that his brother has left him here to die? Or should we simply ask him who he would have us kill next?'

The legionary guard stepped aside, but Khârn halted unsteadily at the open doorway. He placed his palms on the dark iron bulkhead, and slowly put one ear to the metal.

The other World Eaters looked on, uncertain as to what they were seeing.

'Something wrong?' Lotara called out.

'Maybe,' the captain murmured. 'For the first time in a long time, I cannot hear my father's roar.'

*What manner of warp-born sorcery can turn plasteel and adamantium to rippling flesh? Often have I trodden these halls since we returned to Nuceria, and yet still it unsettles me: the transitional space in which the pulse of the ship's great reactor seems to become a true heartbeat.*

*Only now, it is the silence beyond the heartbeat that unsettles me more.*

*Once, this was the broad colonnade that led to Angron's triumphal hall. The anteroom with its great doors, the wide steps leading down, down. In*

*the earliest days, after Desh'ea, a handful of us stood here and learned what his prolonged bouts of silence could herald.*

*Bloated and venous, these living walls have almost – but not entirely – obscured the ancient words that grace the arch high overhead.*

IRA VINCIT, IN SANGUIS LAVANTO.

*The XII Legion bathes in blood now, for true.*

*Two warriors stand beneath this legend. Their hulking Cataphractii suits have left bruises on the floor where they have paced back and forth. They are clad in red and brass and bronze, in imitation of the primarch's own Martian plate from the latter years of the Great Crusade.*

*We are, all of us, an echo of Angron at some level or another. Splinters of his fractured psyche, perhaps?*

*'Devourers,' I call out. 'Stand aside. I will pass.'*

*The first raises his bladed fists in defiance of my rank, traceries of power arcing between the razor-sharp claws. Over the points of his exaggerated, toothy gorget, his eyes are weary.*

*'Hold, captain. You are not welcome here.'*

*His name is Tarugar. An unremarkable centurion, he claimed his place among the primarch's supposed honour guard after I slew his predecessor Borok, and walked away. Tarugar did not even earn this paltry thing for himself.*

*He is no champion of the Legion.*

*I do not break my pace. I stride right up to them both, the second warrior levelling his chain-glaive and gunning the motors.*

*The click-whine of his Terminator armour's heavy actuators gives him away. In the instant before his all-too-obvious lunge, I slap the weapon's blade down with one hand and break the haft beneath my boot.*

*Tarugar slashes at me with his claws once, twice. Drop. Turn. Come up behind him. The other legionary tries to grapple, to hold me in place for the killing strike. His strength is immense. The breath is forced from my lungs. I snatch the combi-bolter at his hip, and press it to his bare forehead.*

*Single shot.*

*Brain matter, dark blood.*

*How many Devourers have I slain, now? How many more will I?*

*The dead warrior topples over backwards, taking me down with him. It is a few seconds before I can slip free of his spasming arms, tossing the gun aside.*

*Tarugar stands dumbfounded. He raises his claws another fraction, but takes half a backward step as I move inside his guard unopposed. I can feel the blades' field prickling the hairs on my forearm.*

*I lean in close. His adrenaline levels are spiking. My voice is a pitched, cold whisper.*

*'Does Angron even know your name, Tarugar? I doubt it. Stand aside.'*

*He grinds his teeth. He battles not against me, but against his Butcher's Nails. I can read my brothers as easily as I could once read our father, and Tarugar's sense of self-preservation soon outweighs his need to test himself any further against the primarch's favoured son.*

*'Damn you, Khârn,' he hisses. 'I hope he eats you alive.'*

*I glare at him wordlessly as I unbar the doors and haul them open. He turns away, cursing under his breath in guttural Nagrakali.*

*No champion of the Legion. No fit guardian for our primarch.*

*If we still have any primarch left to guard.*

*Yawning black before me, the steps descend into what has become Angron's dungeon cell. I take them slowly, one at a time, knocking aside the debris that litters them with the edge of my boot. The air is foul. I measure my breathing, urging my hearts to slow.*

*Know no fear. Show no fear. Show no pity, and no doubt.*

*We have played this game many times before, the primarch and I, and I have tried to learn from every beating I received.*

*The last step delivers me onto the triumphal hall's floor.*

**'Father?'**

*I freeze. The word, half-formed upon my lips and yet spoken aloud by another voice, brings me up short.*

*I scan the darkness in the chamber's recesses. The spaces between the skull piles. The vaulted reaches of the high ceiling. The only light comes from the anteroom at my back. I slowly, cautiously, risk another step forwards, and scattered shards of bone crackle beneath my tread. I cannot see my primarch, though at least I now know for certain that he is still here.*

*Half a legionary – the lower half – lies twisted on the flagstones like a discarded plaything, capped with a protruding kink of broken vertebrae. There are large teethmarks in the buckled ceramite of his war-plate. I see no point in questioning who he was, or where the rest of him might be.*

*Another step. Another. I carefully turn my back to the nearest wall, and let*

*my vision adjust.*

There.

*Angron's eyes smoulder with their own infernal light, though far less so than the last time I stood before him in this place. Then, his inhuman gaze had been fierce, and fearsome, so that not one of us could long hold it. The murderous glare of the gods' most lethal creation.*

*But now the daemon prince watches me with something like… wariness?*

*He is crouched in the shadow of his throne – and such a thing is no small marvel for a being of his warp-gifted size and majesty.*

*No. Not crouched.*

*Cowering.*

*I cannot process what I am seeing. The Nails' ticking is an aneurysmal pulse in my ears, as well as my mind.*

**'Father?'** *he calls again. Gone is the bestial growl, the hoarse rumble of a throat no longer capable of screaming itself raw. I would say, rather, that he sounds more like himself again. His old self. His former self. The broken warrior he was, before… before his…*

*I do not know the correct term. I do not care to know it. This is beyond me, beyond any of us. We no longer trouble ourselves to wonder.*

*His immense, clawed fingers slip from the side of the throne as he pulls further back into the gloom, edging away from me.* **'Father… is it over?'**

*He has broken his chains again. I can see them trailing on the floor. No one has ever been able to imprison Angron. Not for long. And yet, he has not tried to leave.*

*I steady myself, offering a cautious half-bow. To avert my eyes would be to invite death. I am staring down an unleashed monster.*

*'Sire, it is Khârn, of the Eighth Company.'*

**'Khorne…'**

*'Khârn, sire.'*

*Silence. Then,* **'Grave-grub Khârn. Yes. Yes, I remember you.'**

*This is the most lucid he has been in many months. Do I dare to dream, dare to hope, dare to* pray *that this could be the beginning of something more? Perhaps even the salvation that Lord Aurelian claimed to have sought for him?*

**'Where is the other paperskin?'**

*'Sire?'*

**'The sighted one. I do not feel her nearby. The… The…'**

*He is straining for something he cannot recall.*

*‘Chief Navigator Andrasta. I am sorry to tell you, sire, that she is dead.’*

*The daemon shifts, and dry bones fracture beneath his immense weight.* **‘Did you end her?’** *he asks. The question takes me somewhat by surprise.*

*‘I did not. She took her own life.’ I imagine all the ways this conversation might play out, and decide that any further detail would be an unnecessary risk. ‘We cannot be certain why. We have arranged for a replacement.’*

*The primarch reaches slowly for his blade, half-buried but not forgotten amidst the detritus of the hall. As his fist closes around the scaly hide grip, the runes etched into the black metal begin to throb with un-light, enough to set the Nails fizzing and buzzing behind my eyes. This weapon is not like* Gorechild, *or* Brazentooth, *nor any other that Angron has carried before. It was forged for none but him, and it is always hungry. I have seen it cleave through the hulls of Imperial battle tanks.*

*But he does not raise the great sword now. Perhaps he merely needed to remember how it feels in his hand. The links of his chains graze the flagstones.*

**‘How long do they live, when no one takes their skulls?’**

*I cannot recall the last time anyone exchanged this many words with him. I slowly, carefully lower myself to the floor, making sure to keep our eyes locked the entire time. I will answer any question, no matter how mundane, if it will hold him here in the moment for just a little while longer.*

*‘Mortals are feeble things, sire. Without intervention, they will endure for less than a hundred years, and much of that is spent in pain. But Mistress Nisha Andrasta was somewhat older than that, and curiously frail-minded. It is possible that she would not allow herself to understand what your Legion is becoming.’*

*Angron grows very still for a creature capable of such unnatural and unpredictable rage.*

**‘My Legion,’** *he growls.*

*I do not respond. I regret having seated myself so close to him.*

**‘What is it becoming, Khârn?’**

*The words* gaoler *and* plaything *leap unbidden to the forefront of my agitated mind, almost making me flinch. I have no reason to believe that the daemon prince can read my thoughts, but those two felt disloyal, and irreverent, nonetheless.*

*I consider my response.*

*‘We are following you, sire. We will follow you into eternity.’*

**‘Why?’**

*‘Because you are our father.’*

*The truth of this statement appears to confound him. He looks me up and down, then scrutinises his talons, his forearms, the tips of his folded wings, lingering just a moment longer than I would like upon the heavy iron manacles around his wrists. Then he shakes his head, rattling the dreadlock-cables that still frame those animal features. It is like watching a mindlocked servitor trying to comprehend the myriad hypocrisies of* The Apocrypha Terra *– a mind that once held the capacity to understand, now torn between the memory of what it was and the promise of what it could yet be.*

**‘I am not your father, grave-grub. You are not like me. I should not be here.’**

*The words sting. They always have.*

*Slowly, Angron begins to rise out from behind the throne. He towers over me, the great sword dragging in his grip, his hunched shoulders pushing aside the empty lumen fixtures that hang overhead.*

*I keep my voice level and measured. ‘We have only ever wanted to please you, sire. My brothers and I, we–’*

**‘I should not be here,’** *the daemon rumbles again. His attention is drifting to the doors at the top of the steps. His eyes are growing fiercer.*

*I need to bring him back, to hold him in this now dwindling moment.*

*There is an empty, battered helm lying on the flagstones near my foot. It will serve.*

*‘Do you remember the red sands, sire?’ I ask quickly. ‘Do you remember the honour of the* caedere remissum*? Do you remember what it signifies?’*

*Angron twitches. He peers at me once more, a blast of hot breath gusting from his snout.*

*I continue.*

*‘When we found you, we did not know what you wanted of us. Not really. Nothing we did could earn your approval. The rulers of Nuceria, the high-riders, quickly made their peace with Guilliman after your rebellion was ended, and gladly joined with the empire of Ultramar. Though you would not allow us to return there, we thought to mark the sacrifice that you and the Desh’ean gladiators had unknowingly made for us. For the Imperium.’*

*I pluck the helmet up from the floor. The eye-lenses are broken, the grille*

*dented inwards.*

*The primarch's expression is unreadable. But he has not killed me yet. That is something.*

*I turn the helmet over in my hands.*

*'Here – the twin-crests of the remissum, like bladed horns. When a warrior in the arena knew their mind was failing, when they had spilled too much blood and could no longer find pleasure in anything else, then they would wear them as a warning to their foes. The bout would be* sanguis extremis. *To the death. My brothers and I saw that it was a bold and noble thing to proclaim oneself beyond hope, sire. Beyond redemption.*

*'And so, as the War Hounds became World Eaters, many of your veteran companies adorned their helms in this fashion. We wanted you to know that we mourned* with *you, and that every battle we fought at your side would be to the death.'*

**'Not for you!'** *he growls.* **'The mantle is not for you!'**

*'Then you remember enough to know that it did not end well, sire? We tried to learn of your past, and you killed us for it. We tried to celebrate the breaking of chains, and you killed us for it. We tried to teach you how the Imperium wages war, and instead you hammered the Butcher's Nails into our skulls so that we would eventually kill one another, and spare you the effort.'*

*Without warning, Angron lets out a roar of inhuman hatred and rage, a roar loud enough to rattle my armour plates, and sweeps the great blade around in a flashing arc. His throne of skulls, the throne we built at his command, is obliterated in a single heartsbeat.*

*Chipped teeth and fragments of bone rain down.*

*I keep my eyes closed for as long as I dare – and that can only be a second or two. The daemon is breathing hard, less than a metre from my face. When he speaks, I can see the sharp, iron fangs glinting in his maw.*

**'If you wish to prove yourself to me, Khârn of the Legion, then you must follow this path to its end. We were all born to bleed, but the gods' favour is not given easily, or quickly. You must pay for it with blood and skulls. Blood enough to drown the stars, and skulls beyond number. The crusader will tell you as much.'**

*'You mean Lord Aurelian?'*

*Angron does not appear to recognise the name.*

*I exhale slowly. 'As we feared they would, sire, the Word Bearers have left*

*us. Our fleet now stands alone, deep within Ultima Segmentum.'*

**'Then why do you keep me here? Why do you keep me in the dark?'**

*'This is your flagship, sire. Your place is with us. We spill blood together, so that you may remain.'*

*He shudders, screwing his eyes shut and letting out a vile sound that could almost be a whimper.* **'No. No. The Legion is not mine, not any more. The Blood God calls to me. He is calling me to his side, to… to…'**

*'Sire, I assure you, we are free to–'*

**'No!'** *he shrieks.* **'Reality itself drags against these imperfect limbs! My strength is failing! I should be so much more, but you… you will not let…'**

*The primarch begins to claw at his own face.*

**'This is not freedom! It is slavery!'**

*I fall to my knees. It wounds my soul to see him suffer like this, and to know that we keep him here for our own selfish reasons. It is far more than slaughter for slaughter's sake. For our sins, we have shackled Angron to the material realm, as Lorgar urged us.*

*We simply do not wish to lose our father again.*

I *do not wish to lose him.*

*But, if this loss of self is the price of immortality, then neither do I wish to follow in his footsteps. I do not wish to lose him, but I* will not *lose myself.*

*The daemon prince rises to his full height, opening those leathery wings so wide that they almost touch the pillars on each side of the hall. The deck beneath his cloven hooves begins to shudder as otherworldly energies roil about us. He roars again, bringing dust from the arches above.*

**'I will have blood! Blood! Blood for the Blood God! Blood for my lord Khorne!'**

*The runes upon his blade pulse in time with his black heart, picking out the harshest angles of his hell-forged armour plate, and I wait for him to strike my head from my unworthy shoulders.*

It was more than an hour before Khârn returned to the bridge. He was carrying his battle helm loosely in one hand, the bristles of the centurion crest splayed and unkempt.

Lotara brushed her fingers back and forth inside her uniform collar. The skin on her neck felt raw.

'I didn't know if you'd be coming back this time,' she muttered. 'That was

a bad quake. We've lost power to life support along the upper portside flank. I've ordered a hard seal of the embarkation decks as a precaution.'

The legionary regarded her for a moment as he passed. 'You shaved your head.'

She shrugged, and stepped up to the command dais, sheathing her combat knife.

'I did. It's always too damned hot in here.'

The smile that twisted his features was cruel, but short-lived; Khârn winced as a thin trickle of blood ran from the staple beneath his eye. It looked almost like a red tear.

'Where is Vel-Kheredar?' he demanded, wiping it away.

'Overseeing the repairs.'

'Summon him, Lotara. I have need of his talents.'

The flag-captain sighed, and took her place on the throne. From where she sat, Khârn appeared silhouetted against the flickering oculus. His attention was fixed upon the stained deck plates.

'Admiring your handiwork?' she said, with a sharp click of her tongue. 'Feel free to take a brush to it yourself, if you like. I'm sure I don't have to tell you that blood is basically impossible to clean up without water.'

He didn't answer.

She rubbed imaginary grime from between the brass keys on her armrest pad. 'So… has Lord Angron issued us with any new orders? Do we have a specified target?'

Khârn shook his head.

'In that case, *my lord* – what are *your* orders?'

He trudged back to his customary position just to the left of the dais, and carefully set down his helmet.

'Have Master Tevu confer with his fellow Navigators across the fleet,' he replied, 'and plot a course for the nearest occupied system. If we wish our primarch to endure long enough to reach the Throneworld, then we must make sacrifice.'

The World Eaters fleet tore through the void, with the *Conqueror* at its head. The flagship trailed several of her damaged Ursus Claws, the great magnetic harpoons clattering against the scarred hull as she powered on in haste, heedless of any wider strategy than the immediate pursuit of bloodshed.

The bitterly cold world of Tekeli was the first that they encountered. Home to one of the great donjon-complexes raised by Rogal Dorn at the height of the Crusade, it had been intended as a bastion from which future generations might govern the considerable populace of the Ruthan Marches. In those more innocent times, notions of galactic Unity and the Imperial Truth had genuinely prevailed, and even the XII Legion had grudgingly agreed that a day might come when they could lay down their weapons for good.

Of course, it was not to be.

There was no orbital bombardment, no countenance of a void war. The World Eaters simply hurled themselves at the planet, desperate to feel solid ground beneath their feet and a weapon in each hand. The sky blackened beneath the sheer, overwhelming weight of the drop assault, from the high mountain passes to the frozen seas, and the defenders knew that they had already lost.

A maniple of engines from the Legio Thanataris – the only Titanicus element within the sector – had taken command of the local garrison. Deploying to the lowlands beyond the donjon with their Secutarii ground forces arrayed in earthworks upon the flanks, they would make the traitors pay dearly for every metre of ground.

But when the first waves of traitor drop pods came down within the civilian centres to the northwest, the princeps realised they had wholly misjudged the World Eaters' intentions.

The Legion had not come to crush the bastion, but to slaughter every last man, woman and child on Tekeli.

It went on for days. While the vox-net lasted, the open channels became a cacophony of agonised screams, offers of surrender and pleas for mercy, before finally dissolving into little more than fitful static.

On the eighth day, when the last of the Titans fell, a grim shadow finally spread its wings over the tallest ramparts of the donjon, and crimson lightning split the clouds overhead.

Wreathed in the smoke of a hundred corpse pyres, the daemon Angron raised his black blade to the heavens, and bellowed in unholy triumph as his blood-crazed warriors broke through the gates.

*Vel-Kheredar knows me well, it seems.*

*The archmagos reforged* Gorechild. *Now he has reforged me.*

*22.*

*I will wear the red, the brass, the bronze, fresh from the armoury and turned by my own hand, though I am no Devourer. I spit on Tarugar and all the rest. Our primarch is a newborn creature of the warp, a prince of blood. He needs no protection that legionaries can offer.*

*Rather, I am sanctified in the colours that are said to most please our new god.*

*But I will not lose myself.*

*23.*

*Many of my brothers have followed my example, even as they follow me now on the field of war. The brain-fire keeps our blood hot. With every swing of our blades, we anoint the icy ground before us.*

*24. 25.*

*We will walk the Eightfold Path.*

*We will wear the mantle of the caedere remissum, even though the primarch forbade it.*

*We will rebel, just as he rebelled.*

*We will kill not because we are ordered to, but because we live for it. Blood, and pain, and nothing more.*

*26.*

*This last addition is the purest form of worship I can imagine, glowing bright and crimson in the corner of my visor display. It is a calming counterpoint to the Nails' fierce tick, tick, tick…*

*Vel-Kheredar knows me well indeed.*

*27.*

*A tally. A measure of my skill, and a tether for my soul.*

*The others may do as they wish, but I will not lose myself.*

*28.*

*I will not become like our primarch.*

*29.*

*30. 31.*

*This is no brotherly contest of old. These are my offerings to the Blood God. By the count of their skulls will I prove my worth, for they are all I have to offer in place of my own, before each new battle's ending.*

*Tekeli. Horgan Prime. Dabrosc, and all three of its moons. Stenyr. The orbital cities over Parliax. Another world, whose name I forget. Nebe VI. Nebe II. Deluge.*

*And on, and on, to the hallowed Throneworld itself.*
*32. 33. 34. 35.*
*My father's name is Angron. That is all that he has left.*
*We have only Lorgar to thank for that.*
*And one day, we will.*

OceanofPDF.com

# CHILD OF CHAOS

Chris Wraight

*OceanofPDF.com*

So, what do you want from me?

Perhaps some kind of explanation? Some kind of great redemptive story, to explain the way events transpired? Perhaps there was a reason, a causal mote that made everything explicable, and in turn, when you understand that, you might loathe me a little less than you do at present.

But there isn't one. I never had time for redemption. I am, as you might say, *elemental*. Axiomatic. Somebody within this whole skein of false turns had to be.

As it turns out, I am compassed. I am what I am – that is my blessing, and it is, for symmetry's sake, my curse.

Now wait. I get ahead of myself. An explanation was desired, and so I should start on Colchis. You could make a case that everything – *everything* – started there. What a desperate, awful place to start.

Then the beginnings always are, I suppose.

Gods, I hated Colchis. I hated the heat. I hated the dust and the thick sweat of it. Even before I knew that other worlds existed, I cursed the gods for making my home so unbearable. There's a reason why religions prosper in deserts – there's nothing else to do but ponder the misery.

I used to sit in the shadow of my father's house, squatting as the air shimmered, and wait for scorpions to scuttle out of the glare. I'd catch them in my bare fingers and hold them up, watching them wriggle. I'd pluck their limbs off, one by one. Sometimes I'd get stung, sometimes I wouldn't. It was a kind of game, though not a very good one. Once, a sting made me feverish for a month, leaving me boiling on my mat inside with visions and shaking. I might have died. I didn't care much, either way. Once I'd recovered, I was sitting right back out in the porch, waiting for the next one to scamper into range. Ever since then, I've played the same game: get close to the danger, see how long you can last before it bites you.

It doesn't matter which town that was. I can barely remember it myself. They were all the same – thick with filth and haze and the stink of perspiration and refuse. My parents were exasperated with me. They wanted me to learn a trade, get ahead, find something useful to do. I didn't want any of that. I wanted to be rich without trying. I wanted to have slaves and concubines. I wanted to play my scorpion game with people. For a long time, it wasn't clear how I would be able to achieve that, but fate had a way of leading me into opportunity.

I had noticed, being an observant sort, that the Covenant had become the kind of organisation I might do well in. It is fashionable now, among those who still pretend to keep records and tell histories, to think of the Covenant as some wellspring of piety – the precursor to the fundamental religion that came later. Perhaps it was, in some places. Maybe in Vharadesh they did things properly. Out in the provinces, though, the priests had begun to develop a reputation. They drank. They gambled. They were violent, and they used that violence to gather up riches. Even the devout knew that the tithes they paid didn't all end up embellishing temples. The whole edifice was like a spoiled aquifer, with a cold and oily heart locked away from the searching light of the sun.

So you can understand the attraction. I could see myself in those robes, with a palace of my own where a fountain would tinkle in the courtyard and a chamber full of young things would lounge around in silks and count my coins. Getting there was not straightforward, though – for all their decadence, the clerics held on to power with the rictus grip of a fresh corpse. Only the well-connected were sent to the seminaries and taught the rites and shown how to read the old texts. For street-trash like me, there was just penury to look forward to.

I didn’t give up, though. The idea had entered my head, and it stuck there. I hung around the oratories and watched the aspirants come and go, waddling like fat dogs. I listened at the window when they chanted their songs, and began to learn the patterns of the words. As I got older, I got bolder. I crept into the old scriptoria when the doddering masters had dozed off, and I stole books. Bit by bit, I started to piece together the catechisms and the litanies. It didn’t make any sense, of course – they were just words – but I memorised a lot of it. It all came naturally. Of course it did. These were the words I was born to preach, whether or not I believed them. I did believe, later, but back then they were just symbols, like codes on a lock.

There was a young man in my settlement, a pious one, who had inked some words of the holy books onto his face and shaven head. Every day before dawn he would apply more henna, re-writing the sacred glyphs with only the aid of a polished silver bowl for reflection. For this, he was considered something of an inspiration in our fly-blown township. Even my own mother, a fat and lazy slattern if ever there was one, noticed his diligence.

‘Why can’t you be more like him?’ she would complain, picking at her fingernails and watching me sitting idly in the porch. ‘Why can’t you be more like Erebus?’

Now, you see, thoughts like this have a terrible power. I took her words to heart. I pondered them. And I thought to myself: why *can’t* I be more like Erebus?

I was thinking the same thing as I garrotted that young man. I might even have said the words out loud as I twisted the string and watched his eyes bulge and pop. That was the first time I killed a living soul, and gods, was it sweet. My heart was pumping and my face was glowing. The more his life ebbed away, the more I felt my own burgeoning. By the time I let his body drop into the alleyway, I was positively singing inside.

The sensation didn’t last long. There was all the tedious business of disposing of the body, then rooting through his belongings to get what I needed, then turning my back on my birthplace and setting off into the great dust – I couldn’t stay in a place where he and I were both known. I never once regretted it. I walked out under the southern gate with the stars rising and the heat of the day ebbing, wearing a dead man’s robes and with a dead man’s script inked neatly on my own shaven head.

Ah, there you go. There is the irony. The marks on my flesh, the ones that mark me out as *me*, were never really mine. I wore them after that to ensure my stolen name and persona were never questioned. In time, I half forgot their origins, and I began to care more about what I was writing. By the time I reached for the tattooist's needle, the words had changed and the act was more than one of disguise. Originally, though, it was all just lies.

So what was my original name? Just like the name of the place where I was born, that genuinely doesn't matter. I have become like a daemon, nurturing a secret moniker that only the empyrean echoes. I certainly will not tell *you*. Some things even the gods don't know.

I was lucky, or fated maybe, to be learning my craft at such a time. I was just a boy, as all the seminary acolytes were. My stolen papers and my lies soon found me ensconced at another institution. I studied as little of the genuine theology as I could, but was assiduous in observing the more worldly paths of power. I saw how the priests maintained discipline within the great cathedrals. I saw how fear and ecstasy could cow an entire population. I saw how a whispered word was more powerful than a shouted oration, at least a lot of the time.

These were the last days of the old faith. Already there were panicked rumours of an army sweeping across the desert, one commanded by a golden prophet who would upturn everything and bustle the Powers out of their assumed heaven. The hierarchs of the Covenant began to get scared. The sacrifices became more frequent, protestations of faith and penance for sins were made more heartily. I knew it wouldn't save them. The well was running dry, and in any case, they had already drawn too much water. I began to speculate on who this prophet was, and wondered if I could somehow align my cause to his. I was growing tired of my withered instructors, and wished to be in the shadow of something with a proper sting.

And then the strangest thing of all happened. I'd spent so much time with all those books, and all that chanting, and all those homilies on the old patterns of pain and redemption, that I somehow neglected to be cynical about them. I found myself saying things, and meaning them. I found myself studying, not to evade the instructor's scourge, but out of fascination. It was as if I'd been dipped into one of the inscribers' inkwells and come out stained. There was never an epiphany. I never moved from

being an unbeliever to a believer, but I began to appreciate, gradually, how much I was aligned to a certain way of being. I was, you might say, a natural. I had been made for this.

I remember being in the vaults of that old mud-brick temple, tending to the tapers and tasting the aroma of hot blood on my lips. I remember looking into the tarnished glass of the altar-mirrors, and seeing not one reflection, but a fractured four. I felt a shiver run through me, despite the ever-present heat. I was a petty thief, a minor speck within the iris of eternity, but I knew I could do things for these presences. I felt they had always been there, hanging in my shadow, lingering over my minor cruelties. The Covenant was their plaything. Perhaps other institutions could be used in a similar way.

So when the prophet eventually made it to our city, and I saw his impeccable profile shine out across a weeping and grateful nation of newly enlightened slaves, I was neither elated nor despondent. All I had to do was wait.

I was still a child, then. I would not be one forever.

And of course I met my prophet in the end, up close. I saw him pass through the gates with his army of swivel-eyed faithful and recognised what it meant for me at once. He was a bigger scorpion, and I needed to get closer.

He was with Kor Phaeron. That raddled old sack of skin and esoteric drugs, he hung around like the stench of cut meat rotting in the sun. I remember that our eyes met, briefly, as the two of them made their triumphal procession through the taken city, although I suppose he won't recall it now. Back then, I was nothing, and he was everything. I was the grub in the dirt and he was the master of a world's zealous armies, standing at the side of the anointed and sucking up his sloughed-off incense.

It is commonly supposed that I must hate Kor Phaeron. We have become rivals, that's true, and within this grand coalition of blackguards and renegades that generally engenders bad blood, but he really doesn't make me angry. I find him amusing. He's worked so hard to keep up, to become one of us, and all he's done is made himself ridiculous. His flesh hangs within his armour like a strung-up corpse. He's kept around out of a maudlin kind of pity. I'd miss him, if he were somehow taken away from us now, for our Legion is not blessed with many jesters, and we can't afford to

lose the few we have.

Once the prophet had come, though, that was the end for the Covenant, at least in the open. We went underground, those of us who understood what things were really about. We gathered what we needed, and stored it away, out of sight. And, such is the way of things, it all became stronger through secrecy. Old words were hissed through locked doors, and we would mouth the ossified canticles under the ostensibly ardent singing of the new ones. They were the best days, if I'm honest, full of promise and guile and silent murders in the dark.

We knew, of course, that He would come soon after that. The prophet kept telling us, and every augur and flesh-sacrifice screamed it out. I wanted to see this Master of Mankind so very much, since I knew more than most what it would mean for the universe. I wanted to witness the creature I was destined to bring low. I wanted to see Him dragged before me like a lowing ox before the sickle knife. I was never, ever taken in by Him, not like so many who afterwards claimed they had somehow been wronged or misled.

I knew, right from the start.

I knew, before He even set foot on my dry-as-bones home world.

I knew all this because I've never aspired to be anything other than what I am – an eavesdropper, a sneak, a fertile soakaway for lies and poison. Judge me if you will, and plenty do, but we all have our places within this far-from-ideal creation.

Here I stand. I can do no other.

First, we had to change. We had to become His warriors. We had to cast our old bodies aside and take on new ones, like caterpillars wriggling out of chrysalises. We went into all this knowing that we were donning blasphemous forms, and that our sacred human shapes would be mangled and pummelled by unbelievers. This was a real sacrifice, despite the gifts we knew we would inherit, and I remember the bitterness of it.

And we were all too old, in truth. Even though our mortal bodies were still on the cusp of hardening into adulthood, we were beyond the optimal age for the transition. As a result, it hurt. It hurt like nothing I have felt before or since. Imagine someone plucking your organs out, twisting them inside out, stuffing them back in, filling your veins with acid and cracking your bones. Many of us died. Some of those who perished badly had been steeped in the ways of the Covenant, and that was enough to give the rest of us pause –

were we *really* being looked after?

But I made it. Like an unlucky talisman that keeps popping up, I pulled through and found myself, blinking hard and bleeding softly, on the other side. For the first time in my life, once fully recovered, I was strong. Horrifically so. Where I had previously slunk and slithered, now I could strut. I would stand before my collection of mirrors and marvel at this muscle-wrapped god-form. We learned to fight in new ways, and with new weapons. We learned to drill ourselves into that heavy armour and use it to make us faster than malice. There was a seduction there, one that could have been dangerous. I briefly saw the attraction of the entire Imperial project – a universe of purely material extravagance, bound by ancient science and divorced from the messy realm of the spiritual.

Only briefly, of course. For the most part, the spectacle appalled me. I began to take the scripts on my flesh more seriously, and the marks became longer-lasting. I selected passages from our various books that could be read in a number of different ways, pleasing all the various masters that, in those days, we had to please. Only later, when my primarch had taken up his own authorial career and things were becoming straightforward, did I make my facial etchings irreversible, and that was long after the need for ambiguity had dissipated.

There were a thousand subtleties to negotiate. Terrans made up the bulk of the Legion, and they were all drearily atheistic. Even the many Colchisians could not be relied upon, split as they were between the old faith and the new one as well as the jostling creeds of materialism. We were a body of mongrels, desert hermits flung out into a void populated by more variety than we could ever have imagined possible. Those of us who cleaved to the single truth – the deep truth – had to tread with care, taking our time, working slowly into positions of authority and influence.

I was in my element. I was not the most powerful warrior in this Legion, nor the most gifted commander, but I was never assailed by any kind of uncertainty. I knew the destination before we had even begun the journey. In a sense, I *was* the destination. I was my treachery, and my treachery was me. There were no choices to make, just time to wait out and traps to avoid.

Out in the emptiness of the abyss, all the truths I had encountered in abstract on Colchis were met in concrete. The first time I set foot on a starship, I could smell the empyrean evaporating from its decks. The first time we made for the warp, I almost laughed at the absurdity of the

exercise – we were briefly, insubstantially, hurling ourselves through the realm of the Powers themselves, and no one batted an eyelid. The level of self-deception was colossal, and I couldn't see how it would be sustained for any length of time at all.

In this, as in other things, I was guilty of underestimating our opponents. The genius of the Crusade was its very audaciousness. The speed it was prosecuted at was mind-bending. Millions – no, trillions – of souls were being directed towards a single goal. While the entire galaxy was at war, it felt like we were all distracted, kept looking up into the glare of a noonday sun, our eyes watering so hard we never noticed the carrion vultures flying low under its glare. If we were not careful, these contradictions might survive examination long enough for His greater task to be completed – the final banishment of the old gods from the realm of the senses.

As I began to understand the implications of this, I reflected on my extraordinary luck on being gradually elevated into a position to do something about it. And, as I pondered that, I reflected that there was no such thing as luck in the universe, properly understood, and that in fact I had always been destined to be in this place, at this time, with my faculties elevated to this point. I was destiny itself. I was its servant. I was its hand.

But until the moment of crisis came, we were all dancing around one another in geometrical figures, like some great brass orrery – agents of two divergent futures, with all our pawns and our capital pieces on the board. I could feel that the underlying currents were accelerating, melding into one another and becoming stronger by association. The pantheon was uncommonly united, putting aside its essential antagonism in favour of one new and vital objective. I could not divine much more than that, for at that time, almost all my efforts were bent on understanding and prospering in this new and unsettling world of system conquest, but I did understand that we were all teetering on a narrow fulcrum, apt to collapse one way or the other soon.

Another thing did become steadily apparent. The violence we were unleashing was a danger to our enemies even as it brought the known galaxy under the heel of Terra. The deaths were mounting, the pain increasing. Across such vast distances, that had an effect. I began to feel that the old Powers were closer to me than they had ever been, and that if I could simply reach out, extend an armoured finger ahead of me, I might somehow touch them.

I have never lost that feeling. The pantheon has remained close to me ever since, whatever lies you may have heard from my many enemies. I have never been their stated champion, not like Horus, but I have always been their servant, their counsellor to the mighty, their assassin, their adviser, their deliverer of souls.

Consistency. That is what they value. Perhaps because they are ever-changing, they will reward the mind that never wavers in its commitment.

Or maybe that is a lie, too. Most things are, when traced back to their beginning.

They defy understanding. They defy categorisation.

And for that, for that one indefinable truth, as I have often said, blessed be their many and malleable names.

So we come to Davin, and I was so sick with anticipation before the final warp-stage that I did not sleep for four nights.

It was, of course, another desert world. There must be something about them. Why do the gods not make themselves more obviously manifest in forests or factories or cities? When we came into orbit, all I could see was a second Colchis, parched and sharp, its ochre plains wrapped around a swollen equatorial zone and squeezing out all other terrain.

Once we'd made planetfall, it soon became apparent what the key difference was. The inhabitants were human, but only just. They were too strong, too strange, as if something had been working on them for a long time. I thought they were all terrifically ugly. My battle-brothers merely saw them as apt disciples for the faith.

This was, to be clear, faith in the Emperor. Let the irony of that sink in, for a moment. Our Legions landed on Davin, for the first time, with the honest and thorough-going intent to turn its population into diligent atheists.

But I did not. I knew what we would find there, as surely as I knew what I would see in the mirrors that now lined my private chamber each time I glanced at them. All worlds have a harmonic – a resonance in the ether – and Davin was no exception. It was a thrum, a press of half-heard sound, like an endless mumbling that lingered on the very edge of intelligibility.

As I skidded across its heat-distorted landscape in my flyer, I could feel the hot pressure against my temples, a hubbub of murmurs guiding me to where I needed to be. Elsewhere, there was fighting. The savages of this world had yet to bow to the inevitable and were taking war to the Sons of

Horus and Word Bearers. This resistance had shocked some of the mortal hangers-on within the fleet, who thought it suicidal and pointless, but they were blind to its true purpose. The fighting would be over soon, but it would keep all eyes away from the deep desert, where tombs lay deep and dormant under the baking sands.

I reached my destination, touched down and de-powered the engines. I emerged from my lander and breathed Davinite air for the first time. It tasted vaguely sweet, like overripe fruit. The dust clotted and stuck to everything – soon my armour's filters were working hard just to keep its airways clear.

Ahead of me rose a temple of some kind, though it had seen better days. Its mud brick and masonry walls were ruined, its towers collapsed. Old stains from old fires still marred the crumbling stonework, and its many doorways were open and gasping in the heat.

I glanced down and saw a ribbon serpent slithering around my ankle. Its black forked tongue flickered briefly, then it slipped away, making for the hard-edged lines of shadow ahead.

I walked up a long causeway, bounded on either side by broken human-sized statues. The further I went, the more I could see how the place must once have been magnificent, an octagonal city-temple of extraordinary size and complexity. We had larger cathedrals on Colchis, but nothing, perhaps, made with such a raw understanding of the relationships between the real and the unreal. I could see immediately that these long-dead architects had known what they were doing. They had known the sacred ratios and proportions. They had known where to site their watchtowers and campaniles so as to catch the red passage of Davin's ancient sun, casting shadows that looked, out of the corner of an eye, like teeth, or horns, or curved talons.

By then it was late in the day, and the air was seamy with tired heat. My surroundings were almost completely quiet; only my breaths and my footfalls broke the stillness.

I found the priest squatting in the centre of a tumbledown courtyard. A fountain lay choked and gasping amid a heap of rubble, its water long gone. Gargoyles and stone dragons looked down on us from crumbling terraces, their gnarled expressions grotesque against the reddening sky.

The priest was as ugly as every Davinite was – a snaggle-toothed, greasy-haired wretch with dirty robes. He blinked as I approached him, then smiled

broadly and obsequiously.

‘You came,’ he said, as if I were some delivery boy on an errand. I was comfortably twice his size, and could have broken his neck with a flick of my finger. He was clearly a fool, near the end of his strength and wits.

‘I saw this place in my dreams,’ I said. ‘But not like this.’

‘It’s not what it used to be,’ he agreed.

He got up and limped across the courtyard. I followed him, having to check my stride to match his pace. We passed under the shade of the gargoyles and into chambers within, all adorned with cracked plaster and gap-tiled mosaics. As we went, I saw faded frescoes on the walls – angels fighting daemons, monsters writhing in combat with knights. I saw depictions of high walls crumbling, and flames leaping over falling towers. Repeated images of a gold-armoured warrior had been scratched out, his face replaced with crude images of a single eye.

Eventually we reached a larger chamber, one buried down in the heart of the city-temple. Its high domed roof was cracked like an eggshell, allowing red light to lance down on to the floor around us. A low stone altar stood in the centre of the space, surrounded by four ritual pillars. The surviving stonework was etched with lines of fine carving – tight-curled glyphs, repeated over and over, just like the screeds on my own flesh.

My skin tingled. I could feel the charge running through these foundations, apt to snap, like static charge, with my every movement. I was breathing faster, my primary heart pumping a little too hard.

‘So this is where it will happen,’ I breathed.

‘It might,’ said the priest. ‘If you are indeed a true messenger.’

I was feeling heady at that point, intoxicated. It is one thing to witness visions, it is another to see the actual site, the actual stone, the actual bricks. I turned on him, catching him by his throat. He gagged, and I almost laughed out loud.

‘Does this feel *true*, priest?’ I asked, squeezing just a fraction harder.

He couldn’t answer. It would take only the slightest movement to crush his windpipe. I very nearly did it. The nexus of death and power in this place was so complete and all-consuming.

But I halted, suddenly aware of someone watching me. I turned to see a little girl, barely more than a babe in arms, staring at me with dark, wide eyes. I couldn’t interpret her expression. It wasn’t fear. It might have been a kind of exhilaration, just like mine.

I let the priest go. ‘Who is that?’ I asked.

‘Only Akshub,’ he gasped, rubbing the weals on his neck ruefully. ‘Do not hurt her, I beg you.’

I studied her, vaguely amused, and she stared back at me fearlessly. ‘Why would I do that?’ I asked. ‘Is she dangerous?’

Then my gaze wandered off, roving across the faded frescoes. They were badly eroded, hard to make out even with my enhanced eyesight. In all of them, though, I saw the same image, over and over again, picked out in the desert colours of terracotta, ochre and sallow.

A knife. A blade. A flint shard, crudely fashioned, the length of a mortal man’s spine. I knew without needing to ask that no such weapon had ever been fashioned on this world. These ancient artisans had been working from visions, casting their minds out on the ether’s tides, knowing what had to come here to fulfil their lives’ purpose.

‘Where will I find it?’ I asked.

The priest looked up at me, fear and resentment marring his old face. ‘I think that is your task to discover, messenger,’ he said.

I smiled dryly under my helm, feeling my new tattoos flex across my skin. It was a good irony, to leave this dried-out old husk to meet me here, the desperate last cough of a half-dead people. If I had waited another decade, there might have been no one left at all, just the stones and the dust and the serpents in the sand.

‘Rebuild it,’ I said coldly, looking up at the state of the walls and the roof. ‘A governor will be appointed when the fighting is over – he’ll ensure you have what you need. Rebuild it all, just as it was.’

The priest grinned pathetically. ‘There are so few of us left. Can you not send us… help?’

I knew what he wanted. Slaves culled from our many conquests, the kind he had dreamed of owning ever since he had learned the words of the old curses.

I didn’t bother giving him an answer. He glanced back over at the girl, who hadn’t moved. She squatted in the darkness, watching, saying nothing.

‘I’ll see *you* again,’ I said, sealing the deal.

And for all of this, I am hated.

For being there at the outset, for laying the foundations that others would willingly build on. I think they wish to find something in this story that

explains things – some moment of decision, some choice that could later be regretted or accounted for. But it's just as I said – none exists. I have always been on this road, never turning, never deviating.

A long time ago, aware of my limitations, I formulated an expression to capture my condition: *blessed is the mind too small to doubt*. I am very attached to this maxim, and propagate it wherever I can. I hope it will be taken up with enthusiasm once our task is completed and the False Emperor is expunged from eternity.

For now, though, I am content. I am loathed by those I betrayed, and loathed by those I guided into betrayal. I have brought a Warmaster to the Truth, and cracked the galaxy's vaults to speed his armies. I have burned worlds, and been burned by them, and who thanks me for this? This rebellion does not even bear my name – it bears the title of the scorpion I stayed closest to, the most dangerous of the breed who will ever live.

Now I observe my disgrace. I consider the wounds I have suffered, and the pain that will dog me forever. I consider those that inflicted such ignominy upon me, and how they started their stories so nobly and will end them in the gutter.

They hate me, not because of what I am, but because of what they were. They hate me because they turned, and I did not. The records of our enemies call us all turncoats, but I changed no allegiance. I was always here, just as I am now, aware of myself and the universe that made me. I lied with every breath I ever took, except to myself. That is purity, of a kind, and something that no other soul in this grand armada of renegades can boast.

I look on Terra now from my void-cold vantage, and see its huddled lights glimmer in the fragile dark. Soon the order to attack will come, and the final act will be entered. The monsters I created will burst from their fetters, giving no thought to what long labours brought them here.

Horus mutilated me, my own primarch discarded me. That could be a cause for self-doubt, here on the edge of Terra's fall. That could make a lesser soul slink away, gnawing on his failure even as humanity's bastion collapses at last. But that's never been my way. I've been stung before, and I always come back for more poison. I'm still the boy in the shadows of Colchis, pulling on the garrote-string and feeling my blood pump.

The old games never really ceased, in truth. Only the players changed.

Nothing remains to be explained. I can whisper these truths to my own screed-inscribed face, if I wish, that I can now hold up in front of my own eyes as my only audience. The ragged flesh is dry and cracking now, and will fall apart soon, but I keep it, just as I used to keep my mirrors for the same purpose.

I took this face from another man, once, to become what I wanted to be. Now it is my reminder, that all despots are fragile, and that the hand of destiny will always be despised.

Such is my power, now, I could fashion a new skin in moments. I choose not to. My face still weeps blood under my helm, glistening on flayed muscles. It hurts, and that too is a reminder.

I was there at the start. I was there before we even had names for all the things we're doing now. I have no congregation any more, but I will again. The faithful will come back, thirsty for accounts of how this feat was achieved, and I will have stories waiting for them. Such stories. Stories that will make their ears bleed and their hearts burst.

So it's not done yet, Erebus. Not yet. Just watch.

Just watch.

*OceanofPDF.com*

# GRANDFATHER’S GIFT

Guy Haley

*OceanofPDF.com*

There once was a being who was divided by himself. Opposed in all he was, contrary, and doomed.

This being was man who was not a man. He was a sorcerer who despised magic. He was a saviour who had turned to damnation. He was a treasured son who hated his fathers.

He forgot all this, for a while, and when he awoke upon the slimy moss, he recalled nothing of his life. For a few, blissful minutes he was without past or prejudice, and knew a measure of peace.

It could not last. A part of his hypocrisy was a desire for knowledge, although he had once judged a brother for seeking the same. His mind set to work assessing its shroud of flesh. He was a he, he knew that instinctively. The first piece of the puzzle in place, his sense of peace began an inexorable retreat.

He was made in the form of a human male, with the bilateral symmetry of a Terran organism, and the feet and hands of a post-simian being. He was not a man. Men were small and weak, but he was strong, improved upon – man made god. His human form caged immortal power. Once he remembered that, he realised he had always known what he was, better than his brothers did.

He had brothers. Peace fled further. Bitterness filled its void.

He sat upright. Strong hands pushed into the lawn. Filthy water welled from the giving surface. He looked around, perplexed, at black trees reaching out coy branches from the mist. Marsh gas filled his nostrils with its fulsome scent, and that stirred another memory. His hand went to his throat and his face, seeking out the apparatus that should cover his mouth, the gas exchange and vaporator that filled his lungs with the airs of his youth. Finding their lack, a memory of fog-choked mountains rushed back, and with it, rolling onto his tongue sure as a marble down a tube, was a name. His name.

'Mortarion,' he said. 'I am Mortarion.'

He got to his feet and scanned the miserable trees that fringed the lawn. Nothing moved among them but curls of vapour dancing at the decree of gentle currents.

Mortarion looked down at himself. Tall, wan yet powerful, spare of limb and gauntly featured, there was iron strength in the sinews of his frame. Long, lank hair brushed his cheeks. He wore loose clothes of grey, a tunic and trousers, covered with a robe. He never dressed like this. He knew that too. Of his gas mixer and his pistol, the Lantern, the Barbaran plate that armoured him and his scythe, *Silence*, there was no sign. None of the panoply of war he bore everywhere was to be seen. He looked about again, expecting, perhaps, for his armament to be heaped up at the foot of a tree for him to take up. It was not.

A further peculiarity struck him. The form he wore, though it once was his, was his no longer. There had been… alterations. The genetic masterwork of his second father had been perfected by further gifts. Gifts from a true divinity, not the false god his first father was, inured him to all pain and harm. He had been remade into a lord of death. And yet here he was, as untouched as the day his second father had come to find him. He remembered light and disappointment, and a hatred that curdled his soul. Or was all that just a dream?

He could not tell. He did not know. He was as he had been long ago, or not so long ago. He had changed, he had not changed. Both statements appeared to be true.

'Barbarus?' he said aloud, his whisper stirring clotted air. No, it was not Barbarus. The idea struck him as ridiculous as soon as he spoke. Barbarus was gone. He had a new home.

Dim recollections pressed at him. His laboratory, high in the mists of another world akin to Barbarus, but so much worse. Experiments with arcane technology. The fruits of his triumph over base sorcery. Technology he was determined to perfect. The technology was not the end. There was a purpose to it… There was something he was seeking, something he had wanted for years. He grimaced in frustration. What he sought, he could not recall.

His head was empty of knowledge, so, like the scientist he was, he fell back on observation, the first tool of rational investigation.

The lawn was of emerald-green moss, so deep his bare feet sank up to the ankles and soaked the cuffs of his trousers. The black trees ringed it; a predatory plantation. He spied a path of broken stone leading from the lawn and, on a whim, followed it.

He emerged into a wide space. It was square, deliberately planned, he thought, for it was divided into beds of fibrous mulch separated by paths. Crops of fungus sprouted with such unrestrained variety they could only be cultivars. There, all sign of a guiding hand ended. Neglect took away the arrangement's beauty.

The paths between were overgrown. The hedge had gone wild, its rotting boughs brushing the ground. The ornament at the centre was so shrouded in dead growth that its shape was indiscernible.

'A garden,' he said. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply of the moist atmosphere. 'A garden perfumed with subtle decays and rots.'

It was a garden to his liking. It reminded him of home.

He decided to tarry a while, and began to explore.

Mortarion walked trails overhung with drapes of dripping mosses. They swept the ground like beards, the trees they trailed from stooped and gnarled like old men. Fat flies droned a soporific, buzzing music from blackened flower to blackened flower, harvesting no pollen but depositing a generosity of blight with each heavy landing. Ponds scummed with algae and thick ropes of stinking weed eructed poison gases. Rotting heads hung as fruits in an orchard of trees, whose bark was soft and white as the skin of drowned men. Untended vegetable patches sprouted diseased hands that swatted feebly at the flies devouring them. Gurgling brooks of filth wound their way between meadows of sopping black reeds. Things croaked and twittered in the margins. Little fat creatures stared at him with glowing eyes and tittered with undisguised malevolence. Flapping black birds whose

bodies dribbled noxious liquid filled ornamental crags with their squawking.

Mortarion wandered the greenswards, woods and marsh of this garden. He took no particular route, meandering aimlessly. A motionless, sickly green sun burned behind the fogs, its orb bloated by diffraction and warm as a night fever. Time was runny, thick as phlegm for a while, sometimes dissolving into quick seconds fluid as thin plasmas. Years could have stolen by.

Not once did Mortarion tread the same path twice. Not once did he witness the same sight. He found much to amaze him.

All the while his body was under attack, though he was not concerned. His body was inured to disease. Phage and spore sought to take root in his skin. His nose tickled with the repeated inquiries of viruses. Yet nothing could mortify his perfect flesh, and he remained free of morbidity while everything else ran thick with infection and decay. Acidic dews rotted through the cloth of his suit, making it tear and fall apart upon him. Soon he was nearly naked, and smirched head to foot with foetid matter. But in that garden he felt no shame. He belonged there. Though the peace of his awakening had gone, and the gnawing bitterness that was his constant companion had returned, Mortarion was calm. The sweaty warmth of the sun was delightful. He marvelled at the profusion of growth. He recalled another life, another time in service of his second father, who would deny all this rot and renewal. With the revelation of such splendid, fecund decay he wondered how he could ever have believed in a stable universe. The myth of man’s supremacy was laughable in the face of entropy, and so he did laugh, long and hard.

Weeping from afar interrupted his mirth.

His laughter faltered. Mortarion had long since hardened his hearts against misery. He revelled in his woes, and though his own bleak stoicism was affectation, he had come to find those who suffered contemptible. Misery was the natural state of man. It should not be denied, and certainly could not be washed away with tears. Such was the despair in the cries from the mist that it touched upon a part of him long since scabbed over. A human empathy. A human need. An understanding of, and care for, the pain of others. He remembered village women mourning their stolen children. He remembered misty valleys. He remembered the urge to fight to stop that crying.

Before he had time to think, he was heading through a moist thicket and down a hill. Brittle shrubs gave way to open ground, and a hollow in the land opened in front of him. It had contained some sort of folly, or perhaps a fane, but the stones were scattered and crushed into the surrounding mud and the ground churned up so thoroughly that the hollow's bottom had become a wallow filling with creeping, soil-dark water.

In this modest bath sat an enormous being. A huge thing, a giant, stout as a trencherman whose greed had fattened its limbs to pillows and its stomach to a mattress, and whose head was as square and as squat as a cushion sinking gracelessly into shabby old furniture. Its skin was riven with cracks, plagued with sores, troubled with mites and wounds and dribbling rashes. Upon the chest the skin had decayed entirely, displaying greying muscle beneath. A great hole opened into the being's chest cavity, where in the caves of its ribs little beings played and fought over scraps of rancid flesh, miniature versions of the giant they parasitised.

A daemon, Mortarion thought. A daemon of Nurgle. Neither the word daemon nor the name Nurgle perturbed him. The plague god was his master, he remembered, embraced in a moment of desperation. That caused him no trouble either. It simply was.

This daemon was different. Mortarion had treated with these things, he had fought them, he had allied with them. They were capricious but jovial, laughing as they slew, chortling as they released their pathogens, and joyous all the more as mortal flesh blackened and ran. Not this one. This one sat with its face buried in pudgy hands so that its features were hidden and its horns hung miserably low.

The daemon was so immense its head came level with the lip of the hollow. It was powerful enough to do harm to Mortarion should it desire. He had never seen a daemon weep that way, and his curiosity overcame his caution.

'O Daemon,' he said, speaking the o, for together with d, a, e, m, o and n it made seven letters, and in seven there was power. 'Why do you cry?'

The monster started. Not having heard Mortarion approach, the daemon was embarrassed to have its sorrow witnessed and endeavoured to hide it, flicking away tears of pus, clearing its throat and blinking rheumy eyes to clear them.

***'You have not heard of the woe of Khu'gath?'*** it mumbled.

'Khu'gath? I think I know that name.'

The creature cleared its nose into its hand with a long, foghorn blast, then pawed the resulting effluvia away onto its leathery hide. It wiped its runny eyes upon blubbery forearms and nodded earnestly.

***'Yes, Lord Mortarion. You and I have fought together many times. We are allies you and I.'***

'I do not recall,' said Mortarion.

Khu'gath shifted its bulk and the ground quaked. The daemon moved its giant head towards Mortarion. Its rotting septum quivered as it sniffed. ***'Ah!'*** it said, realisation overcoming its misery. ***'That is because it is yet to happen. It will though, oh, it will. Time means nothing here.'***

That made a sort of sense to Mortarion. Beneath his forgetfulness he knew these things as well as he knew the parts of himself. 'I see. In that case, we are friends.'

***'As much as we can be,'*** agreed the daemon.

'Then tell me, why do you weep, Khu'gath?'

Khu'gath folded its hands in its lap and stared at them. ***'Our master's boon is the cessation of suffering. Fatalists, pessimists, realists, all who acknowledge the inevitability of woe will cease to be troubled by it should they embrace our grandfather. Our master brings joy. He releases us from sorrow.'***

'Yet you are not free of woe.'

***'True, true, all too true!'*** Reminded of its misery, Khu'gath resumed its weeping

'But why?' said Mortarion.

Again Khu'gath swallowed back its sorrow. ***'The manner of my creation. Our lord was working in his manse,'*** it waved one flabby paw vaguely towards the east, ***'creating the greatest plague that would ever be known. It was never released. I was a mite, a nurgling, a thing no bigger than your hand span. I fell within his cauldron and drank it dry. So potent was the brew that I swelled and swelled, becoming as you see me here.'***

'So our lord hates you?'

***'No, no, no!'*** said Khu'gath forcefully, angered at this slight against their god. ***'Far from it. He loves me, and that makes it so much worse!'*** It began to weep again.

'I, too, brought sorrow on my father, but I am glad of it, for I hate Him.'

***'Then you are luckier than I. You have purpose, and though you have no father now, you have a loving grandfather. Who does not know of the***

***great Mortarion! How the garden filled with joy when you turned to our lord.'*** Khu'gath licked its wide lips with a scabrous tongue. ***'Tell me then, favoured one. How come you are here? Why are you not abroad doing the good work of Papa Nurgle?'***

'I am not here. I am in my laboratory,' said Mortarion, and as he spoke the words more recollection came to him. 'I was engaged upon a search for something.' He frowned. 'Yet I cannot recall what. My machines overloaded. I woke to find myself here. It is strange. I did not think I could dream any more.'

Khu'gath clapped its hands delightedly.

***'You do not dream! You trifle with magic. You walk abroad in the realms of the soul. This form you wear here, it is your essence. You pass from the realms of flesh to the Realm of Chaos. You are a sorcerer.'***

'It is not magic. It is science,' said Mortarion dangerously. 'I remain innocent of sorcery. My service is performed with utmost rationality. I am in my laboratory.'

***'Are you now?'*** said Khu'gath.

'I am.'

***'In the place they call the Plague Planet?'***

'Yes,' said Mortarion.

***'A planet reformed by your will.'***

'A planet reformed by my efforts.'

***'I disagree. Did you use machinery or slaves? Did you dig and pile, did you cultivate and plant?'***

'No,' said Mortarion. 'I employed the sacred arts of numerology, for in sympathetic mathematical calculation the forms of things may be changed.'

***'That sounds like magic,'*** said Khu'gath.

'It is not,' said Mortarion.

Khu'gath shrugged. ***'As you will. What of this place?'***

Mortarion looked around. 'It is a projection of my mind, nothing more. The full nature of Grandfather Nurgle is unknowable. This garden is too mundane to encapsulate his being. The garden is a metaphor, the attempt by a limited mind to comprehend the ineffable.'

***'So you created it then?'***

'If it were real I could not create it. But it is not real, so in a sense I did.'

***'I am real. The garden is real. If you made it, that would be magic. You are a sorcerer,'*** pronounced Khu'gath with certainty.

‘I am a manipulator of the warp through the application of numerological truths.’

***‘Magic, magic, magic!’*** said Khu’gath.

‘I will not argue with a dream,’ said Mortarion.

***‘This is no dream, my friend. Tell me, do you remember your purpose here?’***

‘I do not. I admit.’

***‘I will tell you then, for Grandfather knows, and all Grandfather knows, I know. You are looking for your father. Your first father. The sorcerer who enslaved you.’***

‘I am,’ said Mortarion, with sudden clarity.

***‘You are,’*** agreed Khu’gath. ***‘And you will never find him like that. You must be changed.’***

Khu’gath clapped its hands and rubbed them together. With astonishing speed, it snatched Mortarion up and squeezed and moulded his flesh. It hummed as it garlanded the primarch with change. Mortarion was too startled to reply, and could not, anyhow. His wind was kneaded from his lungs and passed over his vocal cords in an accordion wheeze. His bones cracked, his flesh ran. His well-made face was soothed and prodded and sculpted into features new. It was agony. Mortarion was stoic about his suffering. Life was suffering.

When Khu’gath was done, it set Mortarion down upon the brink of the hollow. He was taller, stronger, garbed in his armour and carrying his weaponry. His blood burned with painful energies, and upon a twisted, disease-ravaged face was clamped a breathing mask that filled his lungs with pleasingly toxic vapours.

‘This has been done to me before,’ he said, his voice hollow behind his mask. ‘This is how I am. You did not do this to me.’

***‘Maybe I did do it to you,’*** said Khu’gath. ***‘Maybe it has not been done until now, and this is the first time. Maybe it is the second time. Maybe this is all a memory. Maybe it is the first and second time, or you are a different Mortarion on a different path to the one you remember. All things are true in this realm. You stand in the nexuses of realities, the Realm of Chaos. In this place, all possibilities are true, and all truths are possible.’***

‘The warp,’ said Mortarion. ‘I cannot survive there. Can I?’ Another memory intruded. He could survive, he realised. He had.

Khu’gath sniggered wetly. ***‘If you like. It is the warp, and it is not.’*** It leaned back to admire its handiwork. It frowned. ***‘We’re missing something.’*** It turned Mortarion around and slapped him hard upon his back, dug its nails in and yanked back. Mortarion cried out as a broad set of wings burst from his flesh and unfurled.

***‘There. That is as it should be. Now fly, young Mortarion, and catch the quarry you seek. He is here, in this garden. Grandfather Nurgle has given him to you. It is a gift for your devotion.’***

Mortarion beat his insect’s wings and rose up into the humid air. With every stroke he remembered more of his purpose. At forty-nine feet, he recalled the seven times one hundred years he had searched the warp for the soul of his warlord foster father. He remembered constructing the machines that would let him peer inside the domain of the great powers to seek out the being who had enslaved him. At seventy feet, he remembered the first time he entered the warp, that exultant moment when he had scented his foster father’s soul upon the seething tides of the empyrean, and the endless years hunting over plains of living glass and howling sands, and realms of bloody wastes that crumbled and changed and endlessly reformed.

His foster father’s nameless kind were mighty in life, and in death retained their ability. He had fled, evading Mortarion for centuries at a time. His art had not been enough to shake off his vengeful foster son.

‘Yes! Yes!’ said Mortarion. ‘I remember! I remember!’

His sojourn in Nurgle’s garden had been enforced, he saw, to rest his weary soul, and sharpen his gratitude for the gift to come. Nurgle was a kind god.

At seven hundred feet he could see far across the steaming mires and tangled woods of the garden. Mortarion spied Nurgle’s manse, a crumbling edifice larger than some worlds, whose rooms held universes of delightful suffering.

A light winked on the horizon. A soul flare radiated panic that Mortarion could taste, a piquant savour like wine gone to vinegar.

He raised his scythe in thanks to the plague god, and soared away across the land towards his fleeing foster-sire.

Not long now. The effort of hundreds of years was coming to a close. The soul light of his foster father blinked and pulsed. The afterlife was a perilous place. Souls teemed and whirled in great shoals upon its currents. Some might return to corporeal existences, others became things greater or

lesser than the beings they had been. Many more were torn to shreds by the warp's voracious predators. Others simply faded to nothing.

Not his foster father. His xenos species was steeped in empyrical power. He remained whole. Might like that was rare. Though his kind were extinct in the flesh, their souls lingered in the warp.

Mortarion flew towards his prey. Triumph propelled him at incredible speed. The beating light of his foster father's soul turned sour marshes into sheets of bronze. Such power was necessary to maintain the coherency of his essence after all this time. It was no avail. He would be caught. Mortarion's foster father was afraid.

One moment the soul moved with the darting action of a spirit light, the next it coalesced into something approaching the form it had worn in life, floundering through the wetlands on trembling legs.

Mortarion dipped behind it and drove it on. A ghostly, alien face looked back, and the soul sprang up into a point of blue light and surged ahead.

There was no danger of escape. Mortarion had it now.

The Garden of Nurgle, if such a thing can be said to exist, is so vast that it has no edge. The pursuer and the pursued came to the edge nonetheless, a place where sopping lawns gave way to an infinity of surging energy. The line between the two was far from certain. The garden had a ragged coastline, full of bights and bays where the ocean of souls invaded into its territories, and long headlands that extended outwards in counter-attack. Past the contested territory, islands floated. Furthest out stood a lonely tree, its massive boughs dangling noosed cadavers. And there the realm of Nurgle ended in one sense, though not in others. Turned upside down and all about, and the landscape was different. Seen through another's eyes, different again. From a certain point of view, it was not a landscape at all, nor had it ever been.

A burning light shone far on the non-horizon, a pure, ceaseless light. Mortarion kept his eyes from it.

Radiating pulses of terror, the soul of Mortarion's foster father leaped from the edge of Nurgle's realm and screamed in victory at its freedom. Mortarion allowed him these last few seconds. At the precise moment of escape, the primarch deftly hooked the soul around the middle with his scythe, and pulled it in. The soul's cries turned to despair.

With deft, swift movements of *Silence*, Mortarion dismembered the essence of his screaming father, leaving it as glowing shreds. He plunged a

bony hand inside his robes and pulled out a glass flask whose lid unscrewed and fell to the dying grasses without physical intervention. Like a child scooping fauna from a pond, he caught the glowing fragments in the flask, swishing it back and forth until not a wisp remained.

He lay *Silence* down, took up the flask's lid and screwed it on tightly, then held the glass up to his eye. A tiny, screaming face manifested within and was snatched away by its own agonies.

'On that day, so long gone, the Emperor stole my victory over you,' Mortarion gloated. 'At last my vengeance is complete. You are mine to do with as I see fit. A tiny prison to match the one you gave me. Endless torment, in repayment for your unkindnesses.'

The empyrean swam as in a heat haze, holes appearing in the view. The garden became less real, sinking back into the churn of the warp now Mortarion's thoughts were elsewhere. Displacing the fading landscape and seething eternity was a room of black stone crammed with alchemical glassware and thumping machines that arced lightning.

Mortarion's person and memory were fully restored. His bitterness multiplied a hundredfold.

Before the warp faded from view, he looked to the burning light in the distance and he swore.

'One day, Father, I will come for you, too.'

*OceanofPDF.com*

# LANTERN’S LIGHT

By James Swallow

*OceanofPDF.com*

The message had been phrased to make it sound like a request, but in truth, it was a summons.

It was a father's demand to his son, the orders of a general to his soldier.

*Make haste to my side*, it said, *so we may speak.*

It pretended to be spoken among equals, but Mortarion knew that it was anything but. The Emperor of Mankind could not utter a single word without it becoming an inviolate command.

*And who are you to defy your gene-father?* The question echoed in the depths of the warrior's clouded thoughts. It came to Mortarion in a ghostly voice he almost recognised.

His eyes rose, looking up from the depths of the hooded robe that formed a shroud about his sallow face. The great mantle was draped over a suit of artificer-wrought power armour, which in recent months Mortarion had learned to wear like a second skin, and it pooled on the deck of the shuttlecraft where he sat on a low iron bench.

The armour had been modified extensively after it was presented to him. The body-sleeve, battleplate and synthetic musculature fitted the primarch as if he had been born to it, but Mortarion had not cared for the ornate beautifications and martial décor built into the gauntlets, greaves and

cuirass. To the dismay of the armorial artisans in service to the Emperor, Mortarion stripped the superfluous detailing and discarded it, leaving only the heraldry that was necessary for battlefield operations.

Instead he made them cast an icon of the Death Guard sigil and place that upon the plate. The skull-and-sun was too potent a symbol, too close to his heart to be left behind along with the rest of his old life.

The skull meant death, as it both threatened Mortarion's life and stood as his ally, while the six-pointed sun represented the illumination of freedom he had brought to his world.

*But is our world free?* The voice whispered the question as the small star-craft passed beyond the pull of planetary gravity, and Mortarion allowed his attention to drift to a glassy portal in the shuttle's hull.

Out there, framed against an endless veil of dark nebulae, he saw the arc of Barbarus' surface. From this vantage, his home world was a churning sphere of orange-amber toxin clouds agitated by the radiation of a weak yellow sun. Only the vaguest shape of land masses beneath the cloud banks could be determined. The planet had a baleful, menacing aspect, but still it stirred a strange kind of melancholy in Mortarion's heart.

Even as the revelations of his true roots continued to unfold, Barbarus would forever remain the place where Mortarion had been *born*, and it mattered little to him if he had not actually originated there. Barbarus had forged Mortarion into what he was now, and he would never forget that.

*And yet…* Mortarion's gaze moved to the stormy nebula shroud, billions of spans beyond the furthest orbit of this solar system. He had long known of sister worlds to Barbarus orbiting their sun, having snatched the knowledge of such forbidden lore from the books of his adoptive father, the brutal Overlord Necare. But to know as he did now that there were trillions more stars and worlds out past that Stygian veil… The thought of it was dazzling.

A part of him wanted to see those worlds, to sink his mailed gloves in their sands and waters, to stride across new lands and alien vistas, to fight in new battles. Not since he had been a youth had Mortarion been so thirsty for knowledge. Then, the skeletal and cruel Necare had beaten him and denied any education that was not of the Overlord's desiring, forcing Mortarion to learn through guile and subterfuge. He felt the same familiar frustration returning now.

After they had been reunited, Mortarion's father – his *true* gene-father, the Emperor – had bid him to remain within the bounds of this system for more

than a Barbarun solar year. It had not been easy.

*Imagine,* said the voice, *living your whole life in one room of one house and never knowing anything more. Then the door is flung open and you see a street, a town, a nation, a world beyond. But you are told you cannot venture out. Not yet.*

*Such disappointment.*

The Emperor had come to Barbarus with His mighty fleet, and offered the people of the poisoned world a chance to rejoin the great Imperium of Man, from which they had been lost millennia ago. They took it without hesitation.

Of course they did. They were mortals, after all, and Mortarion's father was a being like no other. How could they have refused Him?

In the upheaval that followed, much had changed, and was still changing. Each day, Mortarion found it a struggle to hold on to the threads of the old life he had lived.

Before the coming of the Emperor, Mortarion was the rebel son of the highest of the Overlords – at first Necare's most terrible weapon, then his most hated enemy. He had turned on his adoptive father and the court of callous beings led by the twisted fiend, fighting to liberate the beleaguered 'lesser' humans of Barbarus from the monstrous predations of the creatures who subjugated them.

Mortarion was an outsider, then a warrior, and finally a leader. He raised an army that took back the planet one domain at a time, and christened the best of those freedom fighters as his Death Guard. He named them as his unbroken blades.

He dwelled on thoughts of those warriors – of Rask and Murnau, Skorvall and Kargul and the others – and of course his acerbic brother-in-battle, his fellow exile Callas Typhon.

That questioning voice he heard in his thoughts always sounded like Callas. Indeed, it was his old friend's way to challenge everything, and to ask the unaskable questions.

All of them were up here too, out in high orbit beyond the planet, aboard the ships that the Emperor had left behind after His departure. Mortarion's elite were the first to be uplifted, and remade by the Imperium's incredible technologies in the bio-labs aboard those craft. Even now, that process was nearing its conclusion, as his most trusted soldiers were subjected to a rigorous regime of genetic modification, biological implantation and neural

programming.

Mortarion looked away, glancing at one of the grey-armoured warriors sharing the shuttle's cargo bay with him. A Dusk Raider, or so they had first been named, one of the tribes of the Emperor's Legiones Astartes – his so-called Space Marines. They were to Mortarion as Mortarion was to his gene-father, greater than mortal men but still born out of mortality.

One day soon, Typhon, Rask and all the others would be like that one. The common clay of the Barbarun Death Guard would emerge reincarnated, striding into the light to stand side by side with the warrior Legion the Emperor had brought Mortarion as a gift. They would all carry the name from that day onward.

Some would not survive the process, of course. Several had already perished, their bodies unable to withstand the great toll the forced transformation put upon them. And there were more to whom this great boon was denied: those deemed too old or whose chromosomal matrix was incompatible with the Emperor's bio-altering technology.

*A waste of good material, said the voice in his head.*

The legionary in grey noticed his primarch's gaze upon him and came to attention. 'My lord?' he asked, taking a step closer. 'Do you wish something of me?'

He was Terran-born, like all of the Dusk Raiders. By Mortarion's word, they too were now renamed as Death Guard, but they were very different from the pale sons of Barbarus. They hailed from dozens of disparate ethnicities drawn from the northlands of the Emperor's distant Throneworld, and the warriors of the XIV Legion were seasoned, hardened by battles in the gene-father's so-called 'Great Crusade'.

The warrior was of standard rank, armed with a powerful boltgun. He was one of several assigned as Mortarion's honour guard, and they were superlative fighters to a man.

'Your name?' asked the primarch.

'I am Brother-Legionary Alexus Xael, my lord.' He gave a shallow bow.

Mortarion nodded. He remembered this one from recent training engagements on one of the outer worlds of the system.

*Good with that gun*, he recalled. *With a dozen like him, Barbarus could have been freed in days, not years.*

At first, Mortarion's instinct had been to distrust these Terrans. In the wake of the Emperor's arrival, he'd had an entire army gifted to him, with the

express implication that he would step into the role of their commander and lead them in his gene-father's wars.

But no leader could start from zero. Just as Mortarion had to learn how to use the new weapons and armour the Imperium granted him, so too he learned the tactics and strategy of how to fight with these Legiones Astartes.

He was an exceptionally quick study, and months of wargames and training had brought Mortarion to where he stood now – battle ready, straining at the leash to leave Barbarus behind and venture out into the galaxy beyond.

But more than that, Mortarion had encountered something he had not expected. He had *bonded* with these Dusk Raiders, in a manner that words could not articulate. In a strange way, it was as if that connection had always been within him. Lying dormant, waiting to be activated.

'A question for you, Xael,' he said. 'Soon we will dock with my father's command ship. What is the protocol?'

Xael's brow furrowed. 'I do not understand…'

'I am still new to this. What will be expected of me?'

'Ah.' The warrior gave a nod as he caught on. 'There is much of the Imperium that prides itself on great ceremony. This is an important occasion. I imagine there will be many formalities to be observed.'

In the depths of his hood, Mortarion's gaunt features twisted into a scowl. 'I have no tolerance for such things.'

Xael smiled slightly. 'I share your dislike, my lord. But I do not have the rank to ignore those demands.'

'I do.' Mortarion rose from the bench and walked toward the portal in the hull.

The rest of the voyage passed in companionable silence, and presently a wall of gold and steel rose up ahead of the shuttle, as the craft oriented itself towards the yawning maw of a huge docking bay.

The great hull of the battle-barge *Bucephelus*, flagship of the Emperor, extended away in all directions. The craft was a gargantuan work of martial artistry, ornate and menacing in equal measure, bristling with sculpted weapons and fields of shaped ablative armour. The mass of the *Bucephelus* was so great that it generated its own gravity gradient, making it necessary for the barge to be moored far away, up above the plane of the ecliptic. Had it come too close to Barbarus, the vessel would have exerted a deadly tidal

influence on the planet’s already-fierce weather systems.

His father’s ship was mighty, and Mortarion had learned that there were many more craft of such size and scope in the Emperor’s war fleet. Some of them belonged to Mortarion’s gene-brothers, the sibling primarchs who had been – as he was – scattered to all points of the etheric compass before they had matured to adulthood.

After their first meeting, the Emperor spoke in elliptical terms about the matters of that event, showing genuine emotion and heartache at the trials His sons had endured. But when Mortarion tried to learn more about the causes of this ‘scattering’, his father deflected every question.

*If He is so powerful, how could He have let such a thing happen?* The potential answers to that silent query served only to darken Mortarion’s mood further still.

The shuttle touched down with a soft rumble, and presently the hatchway at the end of the compartment opened like an iris. Heady, perfumed air entered the ship, and with it came a brash chorus of martial trumpets.

The sound pulled Mortarion’s lips into a sneer and he marched out through the hatch, gesturing to Xael and the rest of his honour guard to remain where they were.

He emerged in the battle-barge’s vast docking bay to find ranks of gold-armoured Custodian Guards holding banners and weapons in salute. There were musicians playing an anthem and other figures in over-detailed clothing whose purpose and function were unknown to him. Mortarion imagined that he was supposed to walk between them with measured steps and feigned interest.

He did not.

Mortarion ignored the gathered throng and advanced alone, striding up a tier of low stairs towards a floodlit reception dais shrouded by towering drapes of crimson velvet. His father was not there, but the primarch did not hesitate, the chamber falling to silence around him as the trumpet fanfare faded early. Now the only sound was the hard thud of his armoured boots upon the deck and the hushed whispers of the shocked functionaries.

He was almost at the dais level when a man came out to meet him. A human in a tall hat and a brocade coat bearing several tech-augmentations, the man was trailed by a device that darted about with no visible means of support. The machine resembled the eye of a steel giant gouged out and left to bob in the currents of the air, observing everything the man in the coat

said and did.

‘My Lord Mortarion!’ he began, his tone at once fearful and agitated. ‘Forgive me, but your stride was… ah… not as *metered* as expected!’ He waved at the curtains. ‘The intent was that your father steps forth first, and you–’

The primarch cut him off. ‘Who are you and what is your purpose here?’

The man stuttered, then made a vague attempt to regain his poise. ‘If it pleases the primarch, I am Lackland Thorn, noted remembrancer and documentarian to the Imperial Court, and the–’

Again, Mortarion did not let him gain any momentum. ‘Remembrancer? What is that?’ All eyes were on the primarch now, but he paid no heed to them.

‘I… record.’ Thorn gestured at the mechanical orb, which hummed to itself as it moved to watch both of them. ‘I write.’ He produced an electro-quill and the shimmering ghost-hologram of a screen appeared projected from a jewel on one of his gloves. ‘It is my honour to document the Emperor’s actions for posterity, so that later generations might know His deeds…’ Thorn seemed to recover some of his earlier self-confidence and leaned closer. ‘I hope to do the same for you, Lord Mortarion.’ He smiled insincerely. ‘I wish to learn more about the ways of your adoptive people, and the nature of your most challenging planet! Barbarus, you call it, yes?’

‘Barbarus is many things,’ Mortarion replied, looking Thorn up and down. Thorn’s patronising tone irritated him, and judging from the man’s physique, the primarch estimated that this ‘remembrancer’ would not survive a day down on the surface of his home world. ‘You could call it *challenging.’*

He pushed past Thorn and took the last two steps up to the top of the dais, hearing a mutter of disapproval move through the assembled crowd. Another protocol he had transgressed, no doubt, but Mortarion did not wait to learn what it was.

‘Where is my father?’ he demanded, stepping into an oval of brilliant light cast from illuminators far overhead.

‘Are you so eager to see me once again? I am pleased,’ said a voice, and from the corner of his vision, the primarch saw the velvet curtains parting. A towering figure in golden robes stepped forward, and seemed to radiate a brighter glow than the lights above.

Somewhere behind him, Mortarion heard Lackland Thorn choke off a gasp

and drop to the deck in reverence. Armour clattered against steel as the ranks of soldiery did the same. Only the Custodians remained standing, forever ready, their devotion needing no such act to affirm.

Mortarion wanted to defy the same compulsion to show obeisance, but he could not. He looked briefly at his father and went down on one knee, before bowing his head. The actions happened as if preordained, as if already written into history.

‘Rise, my son,’ said the Emperor, and there was a cautious smile on His weathered, tanned face. His patrician gaze took in the wholeness of Mortarion with a single glance, and the primarch wondered what his gene-father was seeing. How deep could the Emperor’s vision penetrate? Did His sight-beyond-sight see the colours of Mortarion’s true psyche? Did He know His son’s inner thoughts?

*No,* said the voice in his head. *If He did, things would be different.*

*Wouldn’t they?*

Mortarion came back to his feet and saw the Emperor’s smile widen. ‘You defy expectation at every turn.’ He nodded towards the crowd. ‘Forgive me. This sort of thing does not interest you, I should have considered that.’ Concern shaded His eyes. ‘You’ve lived through so much hardship. Such pomp and ceremony must seem needless and wasteful.’

‘I’m sure it has value to some.’ Mortarion glanced at Thorn.

‘Indeed.’ The Emperor’s smile returned, and He placed a hand on His son’s shoulder, drawing him away. ‘Walk with me.’

His father dismissed His retinue, all but for a single Custodian Guard who followed them at a distance of twenty paces, and He strolled from the landing bay with Mortarion at His side. They crossed through an airlock hatch and emerged into a long, tubular corridor.

The passageway was spun out of a kind of crystalline glass: long curved sheets of vitreous material suspended on frames made of white metal. Mortarion saw that the corridor ran the length of the great ship’s spine, ranging from the dock at the bow of the *Bucephelus* all the way to the gigantic command castle rising up from the stern.

Out through the curved windows, Mortarion saw other ships in the fleet that had borne the Emperor back to Barbarus after His year-long absence. Many of them were golden in hue, decorated with lightning bolts and double-headed eagles, craft as big as leviathans floating in the silent dark.

Others had differing liveries and they bore sigils that Mortarion did not

recognise. One of them – showing the device of an opened book bearing a flame – hove close as a chain of transport lighters moved from it to the Emperor's flagship.

'That belongs to one of your siblings,' said his gene-father, seeing the question before Mortarion could ask it. 'In time, I will find him as I found you, and he will rejoin us. My scouts have brought me encouraging data, and even now they search the galaxy for his probable location.'

'How many of us are there?' Mortarion did not look away from the other ship.

'For now, too few for what is needed,' said the Emperor, in a moment of introspection. 'But that will change. It may take years, but in the end I will gather you all back to me. Our work… our *destiny* is too important to be denied.'

Mortarion wondered what that meant, but he held back from following the thread and kept on his current tack. 'When do I meet them?' Before he could stop himself, something more tumbled out. 'I have never known a… a blood-brother.'

'Very soon,' promised the Emperor. 'Horus is particularly eager to greet you.'

'Lupercal…' Mortarion knew the names of some of his siblings, and the lord of the Luna Wolves was foremost among them. 'The first to be found.'

'He was,' nodded his father. 'Just over half a century ago now, by the Terran calendar. He's led the way ever since.' The Emperor's searching gaze found another of the ships in the fleet. 'Horus wanted to join me to welcome you, but I bid him to hold back a while. There's much for you and I to discuss first… Mortarion.'

The primarch saw the pause and called it out. 'You hesitate over my name.'

*'Child of Death.'* His father spoke the meaning of it, as translated from the old Barbarun dialects. 'It is not what I might have wished for you,' admitted the Emperor. 'I hope you never know the pain of having something so important as a child torn from you, that you could not even name it before it was gone.'

The words were meant to show a father's bond with his son, but the sentiment rebounded off Mortarion and he was unable to process it. This was an alien experience to him, freighted with conflicting emotions.

All at once, it brought back the memory of that fateful day on Barbarus,

when the Emperor’s lander had touched down outside the free city of Safehold. Mortarion and his Death Guard were returning from a failed mission to kill the High Overlord Necare, up in the toxic reaches of the highest mountain range. They found the people buzzing with tales of a magnificent visitor they called ‘the Newcomer’.

*‘I have come to Barbarus in search of noble souls,’* the Emperor had said. *‘Glory and prosperity await. It will be the dawning of a new age.’*

In a way, that had been true. But the new age the Emperor brought to Barbarus began by unseating Mortarion from the position of leadership he had earned through struggle and blood. The primarch fumed inwardly as he thought of that day, of how he had allowed himself to be goaded into a foolish, reckless bargain.

He told the Emperor to leave. He told Him they did not need the Imperium of Man and the light of illumination. In turn, in challenge, his gene-father had offered a wager, of a sort.

*Defeat the arch-enemy, Necare, in single combat, prove you are a worthy leader, and Barbarus will never know the Imperium’s hand.*

*It was a trap.*

Mortarion took up the gauntlet, defying reason to forge his way back up into the most poisoned ranges of the mountains. And there he had called out Necare, vowing to make good on the oath he had sworn, to end him and free Barbarus once and for all.

*But you failed*, said the voice in his head. *As your father must have known you would.*

Mortarion had almost died up there, amid toxins so virulent that even the uncanny constitution of a genhanced warlord could not withstand them. On the brink of death, as Necare stood by and watched his adopted son choke out his last breaths, Mortarion knew the end was at hand.

But suddenly the Emperor of Mankind was *there*, His great golden sword flashing like star-shine. Necare fell to a single blow, and thus Barbarus was finally liberated.

*That victory should have been yours.*

‘You recall the day I came to you.’ The Emperor plucked the words from the air, as if He were reading Mortarion’s mind. ‘The dispatch of that creature… That was the first of many gifts I gave to you, my son. You understand that, yes?’

‘Yes.’

*No,* whispered the voice. *He stole your hard-fought, deserved triumph. And why? So you would be forever beholden to Him–*

Mortarion shook off the dark thoughts with a wordless mutter, as if dismissing a nagging insect.

If the Emperor noticed, He did not mention it. Mortarion's father had paused to study the distant, smoky sphere of Barbarus. 'Your world has changed in the past year. It has grown larger in ways you and your adoptive people are only now coming to grasp.'

'The Pale Sons and Daughters are adaptable. Resilient,' Mortarion replied. 'Without those traits, humans would never have survived there.'

'Admirable. My adjutants inform me that the locutors dispatched from the Imperium have made great progress in illuminating the Barbarun tribes. It pleases me greatly that the assimilation has moved so swiftly.' The Emperor's dark eyes took in Mortarion once more. 'And I have seen the reports of your training exercises with your Legion. Very impressive.'

'They fight well,' Mortarion said grudgingly. In truth, the legionaries were the most remarkable warriors he had ever encountered, and part of him ached to take them into real battle. To let them off the chain to fight hard and pure.

And soon, his chosen kindred would be ready, ascended to a transhuman status that would make them as war-gods to the common men they once were.

*With them by your side, this new Death Guard will truly be a force to be reckoned with.*

'A question arises, however,' said his father, nodding towards the planet. 'I left you a contingent of my most accomplished scienticians and geoformers. Their expertise, their technologies could radically alter the atmosphere and ecology of Barbarus. Erase the lethal toxins in the air and the soil. But you refused to use them. You sent them away. Why?'

'It would be wrong.' Mortarion shook his head. 'The children of Barbarus are not attuned to a soft life. To purify the sky and the earth… That would make my people *weak.* And with the Overlords all dead and gone, they still need something to fight.'

A slow smile crossed the face of his gene-father. 'Worry not on that account, Mortarion. The Imperium of Man has battles enough for the people of ten thousand worlds.'

Despite himself, Mortarion felt a thin smile of anticipation pull at his lips.

‘I have more gifts for you,’ the Emperor went on, and He pointed to another huge vessel in close formation.

It was a great dagger of a ship, a deadly sculpture of crenellations with a sloped prow and a hull shaded in emerald hues. It seemed to pivot at the Emperor’s silent command, and upon the ship’s cliff-like bow, Mortarion saw a massive rendering of the skull-and-sun in gunmetal grey.

‘A war-barge of your own,’ said his father. ‘The *Endurance*, first of your fleet.’

Mortarion felt as if he could reach out with one iron-gloved hand and touch the craft. He wanted it very badly, the power it represented humming in his blood.

‘But before you take command there, I have something else for you.’ The Emperor nodded to Himself. ‘A last formality to mark our bonds of fealty.’

‘What do you mean?’ Doubt immediately flooded Mortarion’s thoughts. All this generosity made him suspicious.

‘I will show you.’

They left the corridor where it bisected an armoured dome emerging from the hull of the *Bucephelus*, and Mortarion matched the Emperor’s pace as the two of them followed a wide, spiralling ramp down into another chamber.

‘My mind is never at rest,’ said his father, and for a moment He seemed melancholy. Then the instant passed and He gestured around. ‘The work of governing an empire does not occupy my thoughts at all times. One must have a craft that one attends to purely for the joy of it.’

That concept was so far beyond Mortarion’s experience as to be unfathomable, so he said nothing. Instead, he took in the space, peering into its hazy depths.

It was a workshop of sorts, and it reminded him of the tech-nomad yards run by the gun-maker tribes and the Forge Tyrants of Barbarus. It was built on what Mortarion had come to think of as Imperial scale – ornate and over-engineered, concerned as much as with needless aesthetics as it was with the function of the place.

Spidery automata and half-human helots kneeled before their master as He passed, before continuing in their labours. Some worked at complex devices of unknown function, others busy with items that Mortarion could see were plates of armour or huge melee weapons. Deeper into the chamber, he saw

glass capsules within which churned globules of writhing energy, liquid orbs and objects that possessed no human geometry.

‘My studies help focus my thoughts,’ said the Emperor. ‘They give me clarity.’ He gestured to racks of prototype firearms and modified marks of Space Marine battleplate. ‘And there is method to it. When each primarch stands ready, I grant my son a token forged by my own hand. Sometimes a weapon. Sometimes a suit of armour, or another object of power.’ He spread His hands, taking in the whole of the place. ‘Your turn has come.’

Mortarion wanted to remain disengaged, distant from all this. But the treasures he saw all around stimulated the thirst for knowledge that had always driven him. He wanted to know more.

He saw holograms of weapons already granted to his brother primarchs hanging in the air, displayed like battle trophies. A great spike-headed mace in black and silver, sporting a baleful eye, floating beside a power sword with a winged cross-guard that glistened with a waxy, cold light.

There were other items half made, still in the middle of their crafting. Mortarion’s eye caught on a suit of sable-dark battle armour at one workstation, and the shell of a snarling, animalistic helmet on another.

The more he looked, the more weapons Mortarion saw. A profusion of them, hundreds of designs and constructions, hundreds of dismantled relics and shards of millennia-old lost tech. The Emperor’s martial diversions were laid out in row after row.

*Your father sees Himself as weaponsmith as much as warlord.* The insight solidified in Mortarion’s mind, and the dark gravity of it drew in resentment.

*Is that what you are?* The voice of Mortarion’s doubts and distrust – so briefly silenced – now returned to him. *The primarchs are His weapons.*

The Overlord Necare had considered Mortarion exactly that as he governed the life of his foundling child. Was the Emperor of Mankind so different?

‘My son?’ The resentment grinding in his teeth, Mortarion turned towards the sound of his gene-father’s voice and found Him offering up a menacing scimitar of broad dimension and shimmering lethality. ‘This is for you,’ He began.

Mortarion spoke before the Emperor could say any more. ‘I already have a blade.’ He shrugged off the giant scythe from where it lay mag-locked to his power armour. ‘I do not need another.’ He walked away, deliberately

ignoring the stiffening in his father's expression. The war-scythe was firm and ready in his grip, as much a part of him now as it had been when he first forged it. Over the years, the blade had been remade, reinforced, made better. It was an extension of who Mortarion was, and nothing else – no star-born metal, no arcane blade-wright – could replace it.

'You refuse my token?' The Emperor's words were mild but there was a warning buried among them.

In a day of protocols broken, would this be one too many? Mortarion considered that as his gaze ranged around the room, and settled on a weapon sitting in a plasteel cradle.

A pistol; a heavy, drum-shaped firearm made for the hands of something bigger than a man. It was cast out of copper, brass and steel, and the form of it reminded Mortarion of a craftsman's tool. This was not the overwrought rendering of some weapon-artist. It was a killer's device, industrial and heavyweight.

Without asking permission, Mortarion went to the gun and gathered it up. 'I do need a pistol,' he allowed. He looked closely at the frame. Parts of the mechanism were disconnected, and he automatically set to the task of putting it into working order.

The Emperor frowned. 'The maker of that weapon called it the *Lantern.* He told me that before I put him to death.'

'What did he do to deserve such a fate?'

'The man led a cult of killers on a manufactory world called Shenlong. They said they worshipped a dragon.' His father's gaze grew cold. 'It became necessary to destroy them in order to ensure compliance of that planet.'

Mortarion found the control mechanism for the gun and activated it. The *Lantern* came to life in his grip, instantly bio-locking itself to his genetic imprint. It sat well in his long-fingered hand, and he sensed the raw, deadly power humming within the casing. 'This will do,' he intoned.

'It fits you well,' allowed the Emperor. Slowly, He put aside the scimitar. 'Take it, then. Use the *Lantern* to cast the light of our Imperium into the darkness. One token serves as well as another.' He gave a nod. 'Once again, my son, you find your own path.'

'You mean, I defy the plans others have for me?' Mortarion said the words without looking up from the gun in his fist.

The room seemed to grow colder in the wake of his reply, and all the

unspoken things between the two of them clouded the air like ghost-smoke.

‘I am here,’ said his gene-father. ‘Is there something you wish to say to me, Mortarion? Speak your mind, if you will.’

There were cords on the belt around Mortarion’s waist, and he used them to fashion a lanyard from which the *Lantern* could hang. ‘I have many questions,’ he said, at length. His voice rasped in the sudden quiet of the domed chamber. ‘But I will dismiss them all to know the answer to just one. Tell me why you took my victory from me on the day you came to my world.’

A rare flash of confusion flickered in the Emperor’s eyes. ‘I did it to save my son’s life. You would have died up there on that mountain. The fiend who tormented you for so long – the only victory would have been his.’ He studied Mortarion for a long moment. ‘I could not let you perish, not after spending so long in search of you.’

‘And yet it was your challenge that sent me there.’

‘Was it? We may still have much to learn about one another, my son, but one thing is clear to me.’ The Emperor pointed at the *Lantern.* ‘Is there anything in your life you have done that has *not* been an act of rebellion? Of defiance? You faced Necare by your choice. That door was already open.’

‘You did not prevent me from stepping through.’

*He knew what you would do,* said the inner voice. *He made you, after all. Who better to know how to play you?*

A chilly, unknowable distance settled in the Emperor’s manner. ‘A father is beholden to educate his sons. You learned a valuable lesson that day. I saw I had to remind you of your humility, Mortarion. There are some enemies you alone cannot defeat.’

*Never!* The silent voice bellowed the denial. *Never admit defeat!*

Mortarion looked down at the weapon in his hand and considered the potential of it. For one giddy second, a dark and terrible question came to the forefront of his mind.

*What if I turned this on Him? What would happen* then*?*

In the next second, the unutterable, unconscionable question melted away, and in its place, there was emptiness. In the yawning abyss of his emotions, Mortarion saw a dim candle of need, an unformed want calling out for connection, for kinship.

He crushed the sentiment without hesitation. He had brotherhood and fraternity among those he had shed blood with – and perhaps he might find

it in the hearts of his primarch brethren in the days to come. Given his gene-father's ways, Mortarion did not doubt that others of his siblings might share a measure of the ambivalence he felt towards their shared progenitor.

*The Emperor allowed you to be taken when you were just a child. Then He found you again, only to diminish you, and for what?*

*To mirror what Necare had done? At least the Overlord had been honest about his cruelty.*

'Will you look beyond this, Mortarion?' The Emperor offered His hand. 'Will you fight by my side in the Great Crusade, my son?'

'I will.' He took the offer and the pact was made. 'I have no choice,' he added.

'Walk with me,' said his gene-father once more, leading him out of the chamber and into vast spaces beyond.

They were in a vaulted hall now, a space so large it had its own microclimate. In the distance, at the far end of the great gallery, Mortarion saw legionaries in greenish-grey battleplate, and amid them, one as tall as he. A noble figure in robes and furs, imposing and vibrant even at a remove.

'Your brother was close at hand, a few light years away in the Zhao System,' said the Emperor. 'When he learned I was coming here, he refused to let me travel alone.' He beckoned the other primarch to them, and the other warrior advanced, grinning, a look of joy alight in his eyes.

'Lupercal…' Mortarion said his name. Once more that strange, ethereal sense of *connection* came to him, more powerful than ever before, a light shining into his soul.

'My brother,' said Horus, his voice thick with emotion. 'Welcome home.'

OceanofPDF.com

# LUPUS DAEMONIS

Graham McNeill

*OceanofPDF.com*

Nergüi’s first memory of murder was that of his adoptive father.

His young ears pressed to his father’s chest, he remembered the frantic heartbeat as the man carried him from the massacre behind them.

At the time, Nergüi didn’t know who was doing the killing.

Down in the utterdark it almost didn’t matter.

Murder was mundane, killing the norm.

Kill or be killed. Kill them before they kill you.

It didn’t matter who *they* were. *They* was anyone beyond the light cast by the stuttering gas-lumens.

*They* was anyone you didn’t know.

*They* was everyone who didn’t bear the cut-mark of your clan, your gang, your family.

Even that wasn’t always enough to keep you safe.

Down in the utterdark, life was teeming and cheap. Brothers murdered brothers, parents abandoned children and wives killed husbands.

Back then, Nergüi was too young to know how the world worked in the lightless warrens and filth-choked tunnels infesting the planet’s bedrock like maggots in mouldy bread. All he knew was the beating of the man’s heart, a man who had become his adoptive father only moments ago.

A man who looked as surprised by that turn of events as anyone.

Nergüi remembered shouts, guttural and hot, like the volcanic heat of the deep mines.

No real sense of their meaning, but he understood the fear behind them.

Fear that had brought the Marrow Tearers with serrated knives to the clan cavern.

And even barely out of swaddling clothes, he understood that hate was fear's twin.

His father stumbled and fell, vomiting a froth of blood and black bile.

Splintered bullet fragments had pierced his lungs. Both were rapidly filling with fluid. He set the child in his arms down and drew a rusted punch dagger. Shadows moved on the soot-stained walls. Gutting knives flashed, fresh-sharpened edges gleaming in the firelight.

Bellowing with rage, his father surged upright and fought.

Because fighting and killing was what you did down in the utterdark.

You fought until your gun ran dry, until your knife dulled and snapped, until your fists were broken.

You only lay down when your heart stopped beating or your skull was bashed open with a rock.

You fought until they cut your throat and laid the mirror coins on your eyes.

He remembered the grunts of grappling bodies, the deafening boom of primitive firearms.

Bright flashes and the taste of bad powder. Fear-stink of butchered meat.

The electric tang of blood in the air.

Father fought hard, but in the end he died.

A ricochet blew out his knee, and a motorised, tooth-bladed axe hammered his side. It tore up through his blood-filled lungs. Nergüi's father fell beside him, blood pouring from his ruined body.

He died staring into the boy's shining sea-green eyes with incomprehension.

That was Nergüi's first memory of murder, but it wouldn't be his last.

Cthonia was a world *built* on murder.

A mesh of iron scaffolding, like cobwebs left by a giant metal spider, clung to the painted walls of the Deeprats' cavern, and looping runs of chain were strung between them like sinews stretched on a drying rack. Lingering

fumes from pipe bomb explosions and gunfire hung in acrid screeds.

The rocky floor was slippery with sweat, shit and the wet remains of disembowelments.

Whooping yells from the fresh-blooded Reiver braves filled the air. His fellow clansmen dragged the limp corpses of the Deeprat Clan to the volcanic fissure at the heart of the infernal cavern.

No one knew how deep it was, only that, way, way down, its walls were said to be crusted with precious metals, gems and seams of chem-rich sediment. When Cthonia's orbit swung it away from the blue sun and her molten heart cooled, it was said a clan could mine a fortune from the depths. Nergüi didn't know if that was true, but rumour of it had been enough for the Reivers to slaughter the Deeprats and claim their territories.

He watched with a mix of envy and pride as the young men – boys no longer – carved their names into the chests of the enemies they had slain.

Kill-names; earned in murder.

The newly elevated warriors smeared dead men's blood across their eyes and mouths. They howled like beasts, savage and feral, drunk on slaughter and war-lust.

The corpses, having served their purpose, were dumped into the magma fissure without ceremony. The braves backed away from its brutal heat as Khageddon hauled the mutilated Deeprat chieftain by his topknot to the centre of the cavern.

The beaten man struggled in their Overlord's grip, wounded and near death, but still alive.

On Cthonia that was never a good thing.

In the utterdark, you were taught to fight so hard they *had* to kill you.

The tribes and clans of Cthonia were not kind to captives, inflicting tortures so hideous they reduced even the strongest-willed to soiled, gibbering lunatics.

Khageddon's hulking metal-and-flesh body was slathered in blood, his own and that of the dozen men he'd killed. His own topknot had come loose in the fighting, and long black hair hung like a dark veil over his face. All Nergüi could see of the Overlord's scarred features was the gleaming silver of his implanted fangs and the pale orb of his machine-eye.

'Reivers!' yelled Khageddon. 'Blood has answered for blood!'

The braves slowly circled him, bent over and beating their callused palms and blades on the rocky floor of the cavern. A low growl built in their

throats, guttural and subvocal, wordless but rich with dark meaning. It was the hunt song, a slow rhythm of metal and meat on stone.

Nergüi felt it touch something deep inside his patchwork body, stirring an aching sense of loss; a memory long forgotten. Or a future he didn't yet understand.

He yearned to join his clansmen, to howl in the pack circle.

But he wasn't yet battle-blooded, and anyone without a kill-name joining a pack circle would be set upon by the braves. Cut to pieces without even the dignity of mirror coins for their eyes.

Khageddon lifted his ritual knife, a long blade left by one of the takers of the dead.

Its edge never dulled, and no matter how much blood it spilled, the red-rust never touched it.

'Aebathan!' yelled the Overlord, and drew the blade across the Deeprat's throat.

He sawed back through meat and muscle, sinew and bone until the head was cut loose and the body toppled into the fissure.

Khageddon lifted the head and let the red rain from the stump drizzle down over his face before tossing it after the body.

In the ruddy light of the magma fissure, he was monstrous.

Life was cheap on Cthonia. Nergüi had known that all his life.

A man's whole existence meant less than the blade he carried, the handful of bullets in his pouch, or the fit of his steel-jacketed boots. Nergüi's life meant less than most.

He'd been told that as long as he could remember.

He was the runt of the clan, a freak of scars. A survivor of wounds no child could possibly survive.

A boy whose body refused to grow and develop like the others.

Some called him a curse, a changeling left by the evil spirits at Cthonia's heart to torment them.

They all wished him dead, but the Overlord had forbidden it.

Khageddon had found him hung from a hook in an abattoir cave of the Corpse Grinders, a skin-masked butcher in a blood-stiffened apron readying him for a greased spit. Khageddon had gutted the man before lifting the boy from the hook and carrying him back to Reiver territory.

No one knew why and he had never given a reason for saving the infant

with shining sea-green eyes.

Down in the dark, everyone's eyes were a dull and sickly blue. Terms like biodiversity were unknown to the Reivers, but everyone knew that different meant *bad*.

Different meant you were an outcast. *Shunned*.

Many were the days Nergüi wished the Overlord had left him to die on that hook.

Khageddon had called him that, a meaningless name from the dead language of Cthonia's first deep miners. One that literally meant *no name*.

'It is for protection,' said Khageddon on one of the rare days he bothered to speak to Nergüi.

'Protection from what?'

Khageddon looked to the roof of the cave, and his pearlescent eye clicked and scratched as the mechanism seized. A shadow of regret passed over his face.

'From the future,' he said.

Anger touched Nergüi and made him reckless. 'I don't need protection,' he spat.

Khageddon backhanded him with a savage blow that knocked him down and loosened his teeth.

'I did not say it was for *your* protection.'

No more was said on the matter.

The Deeprats had been an old clan, one that liked to hold onto the past, to *remember*.

They hoarded useless things in recesses cut into the painted walls of their caves: old books, scraps of paper, and identical crystals that were good for nothing but hand-catapult ammunition. The pages of the books were gummed together with greenish damp, and the papers were simply long lists of numbers that kept decreasing.

He lifted one of the crystals, an angular blue cube with swirling gold veins threading its interior, and lifted it to his eye. The surface was cloudy and scratched, but Nergüi saw a web of impossibly complex patterns in its depths that looked too regular to be natural.

Nergüi shrugged and placed the crystal in the pouch of his tunic.

The other clans mocked the Deeprats for their hunger to know the past, but Nergüi would have given anything to know more about where he had come

from. He had no memory of his mother, nor any knowledge of a father save the nameless man who'd tried to save him as an infant.

Khageddon was the closest thing to a father he had, and the Overlord's hate for him was palpable.

The Reivers hated him too, but if he read the look in their eyes when they thought he wasn't looking, they feared him as well, though he couldn't think of a single reason why they should.

Nergüi circled the cave, running his hand along the wall and tracing the telling of a story painted onto the rock beneath his palm. The mural was faded and the artwork crude, though how he knew to judge it so he wasn't sure. It depicted the harsh blue sun of Cthonia burning above a desolate landscape of soaring machine towers that split the planet's bedrock and greedily drank its bounty.

The farther along the wall he went, the closer the towers grew, until the horizon was filled with their insatiable hunger. Each tower had a groove chiselled into the rock beneath it, and Nergüi traced their looping lines. These represented the mine workings, an endless network of tunnels that had cut deep into the planet and hollowed it out like scavengers picking a carcass clean.

Between the towers were blocky figures, men who travelled the stars in cities of stone and steel.

The old-timers spoke of seeing starships in their youth, titanic monsters of blue fire and fury.

Nergüi longed to see one, to one day behold a field of stars instead of the dripping oil and soot-stained ceilings of rock that were all you saw when you looked up in the utterdark.

But these days, nobody went to the surface.

Why would they? The sun burned your skin, the air tasted bad and the blue-eyed ghouls haunting the ruins preyed on the living for sport. Anyone who went to the surface never came back.

But the thought of something existing beyond the squalid darkness below the surface was like an itch Nergüi just couldn't scratch, a thought that wouldn't go away no matter how much he chased it.

'This can't be all there is,' he whispered.

His finger followed a groove back to the planet's surface and kept going, past the soaring towers, up into the darkness of space and beyond. He circled Cthonia's star and spiralled outwards onto bare rock.

The Deeprats hadn’t painted anything beyond the blue orb, their imagination unable to conceive of what wonders might exist outside of what they could see or what they remembered of the old tales.

Nergüi closed his eyes, picturing skies of blue and green, alien shores of crystal silver, ancient structures of polished granite gleaming beneath a golden sun. He inhaled, tasting the salt spuming on ocean waves breaking against cliffs of basalt, and smelling the loam of rich earth in which living things might grow. The hairs on his arms rippled with the sensation of warm winds over endless plains of high grass, where the air was so crisp and clear it tasted of cut glass.

‘One day I will see such sights,’ he said. ‘One day I will see the skies of these far-off worlds.’

The sensations were so acute, the liminal space between memory and imagination became meaningless. In his mind’s eye he saw a soaring range of snow-capped mountains at the roof of the world, where a single tower pierced the clouds.

A light burned in its tallest window like a beacon, calling to him…

‘I *know* you,’ he said, the breath quickening in his throat.

‘Talking to yourself again, freak?’ said a voice behind him.

Memory, imagination and reality crashed together once more, and Nergüi turned to see four of the freshly blooded braves behind him. Karaamat and his friends, Oromegon, Nyla and Barsine.

He hadn’t heard them enter, and he was normally so careful in being aware of his surroundings.

Karaamat circled the cavern, glancing disdainfully at the mural and the scraps of the old world the Deeprats had preserved. The boy was around twelve or thirteen years old, powerfully built, and with a half-moon scar over his right eye. Oromegon was his brute twin, and like his brother, wore his long hair in a leather-wrapped topknot.

Nyla and Barsine kept their hair long at the top and back, but shaved at the sides, with long scalp locks woven with hooks and nails. Nergüi had always thought the girls beautiful, in the same way that a well-forged knife could be beautiful.

‘What are you doing here, *no-name*?’ demanded Karaamat.

‘Nothing,’ said Nergüi. ‘Just looking around.’

‘You shouldn’t be here, this is *my* cave now.’

‘It is?’

‘Yeah, didn’t you see? We got blooded today.’

Karaamat proudly slapped a hand on the clan markings freshly cut into the hardness of his pectorals. Ash had been smeared into the wounds to scarify them and permanently mark him as a proud killer of the Reiver Clan.

Nergüi nodded. ‘I saw, yeah. Killed three men, they say.’

Karaamat rounded on him, anger twisting his face into something bestial. His hook-bladed knife appeared in his hand, the blade still dull with the rust-brown stains of murder.

‘What do you mean, *they say*? You doubt me, no-name? You think I didn’t kill ’em? I’ll gut you for sayin’ so!’

Nergüi took a step away from Karaamat, pressing himself against the wall.

‘No, Karaamat, no way. I just mean that’s what I was told. You know, because I didn’t go on the raid. Khageddon wouldn’t let me.’

‘That’s right,’ spat Karaamat. ‘You ain’t blooded. Never gonna earn a kill-name, neither.’

‘Because none of the older braves will train me.’

‘Yeah, you ain’t strong enough to be trained,’ said Oromegon, flexing the powerful muscles in his chest and arms. ‘Looks like your body got all broke up, and they didn’t put you back together so good.’

‘He’s the runt of the pack,’ said Nyla, picking up a mildewed book and flicking idly through its pages without comprehension. Rotted scraps of paper fell from within as the pages disintegrated, and Nergüi felt an unexpected stab of anguish to see the knowledge the book contained so casually lost.

‘Please, don’t do that,’ he said, and instantly regretted it as her lip curled in a sneer.

To show you cared for something was to show weakness.

If you cared for something, an enemy could hurt you with it.

Nyla threw the book at his feet and said, ‘It’s junk, no-name. Ain’t good for nothin’ but burning.’

Nergüi bent to retrieve it, and met Karaamat’s knee as he cannoned it up into his face.

His head snapped back, cracking painfully on the wall.

Blood sprayed the mural from his broken nose. Blinded by pain, he fell back onto his haunches, hands flying to his face. He curled into a ball as they fell upon him, driving their boots and fists into his chest and stomach. He kept the muscles tense and his breathing shallow as he waited for it to

end.

Pain was nothing new to him, nothing new to anyone on Cthonia, so he gritted his teeth and took it.

This wasn't his first beating, and it likely wouldn't be his last.

'*Scream*, no-name!' yelled Karaamat, hauling him upright and brandishing his blade. 'Why don't you ever scream?'

'Maybe we ain't hurting him enough,' suggested Oromegon.

'Yeah, cut one of them scars open!' added Nyla.

Oromegon wrenched his arms painfully to the side as Nyla ripped open his tunic. He let her do it.

Fighting would only make things worse, give them an excuse to kill him.

His chest and belly exposed, his pale skin was ridged with scars. These were wounds that would have killed any tribal warrior thrice over, but even a youngblood of Cthonia could see these weren't the wavering lines of shivs or picks, nor the scars of bullet tracks.

These were scars cut with care and precision, a weaving pattern that spoke of artifice and science beyond anything to be found in the utterdark, even among the insane tech-seers who dwelled down in the magma caverns.

'You got put together, no-name,' hissed Nyla. 'That's why you got no mama.'

Oromegon laughed. 'Someone stitched you together from all the runty bits left over after the Corpse Grinders were done with some downdark tribe, I reckon.'

'Then threw you out because you was so useless,' finished Karaamat.

Nergüi had heard all the insults before, had seen the looks of disgust whenever people saw his scarred flesh, pale and veined like a corpse drained by the feral blood-feasters.

He locked his eyes onto Karaamat and something passed between them, some invisible connection.

A glint of defiance, perhaps. Or, worse, indifference to this beating.

It touched some hitherto untapped well of rage within Karaamat. His eyes widened, and he pistoned his fist into Nergüi's face. The blow cracked his cheek and slammed the back of his head against the floor of the cave. Another blow split his lip and splintered teeth flew from Nergüi's mouth.

Again and again Karaamat's fist slammed into his face.

The others backed away, suddenly fearful of his rage. To Nergüi, it seemed as though some potent force was working through the young brave, driving

his fists with lethal intent.

‘Kara!’ said Nyla. ‘That’s enough! You’re gonna kill him!’

Karaamat ignored her, raining down blows with one purpose only. Murder.

Nyla pulled his shoulders, but he was too strong. Too intent on this beating.

‘Leave him be,’ she yelled, drawing her bone-handled knife. ‘Khageddon says he’s marked. You don’t kill no marked soul, do ya?’

She grabbed his topknot and pulled his head back, ready to cut his throat. Instead of resisting her, Karaamat roared and surged backwards. Her dagger spun away, clattering to the rock floor beside Nergüi. He rolled onto his side, coughing teeth and blinking away blood.

He saw Karaamat drive Nyla against the opposite wall.

Saw the girl’s face contort with pain.

Her legs buckled and she slid down the wall, Karaamat’s hooked blade buried to the hilt in her heart.

She was dead before she hit the ground.

‘Nyla!’ cried Barsine.

Karaamat pushed her back. Murder-lust was in his eyes. He’d already killed three people today, now a fourth. None of them wanted to be his fifth.

Karaamat let out a shuddering breath and stared at each of them.

‘Shit, Kara, you killed Nyla…’ said Oromegon.

‘I never liked her anyway,’ he said, bending to twist and pull his knife from the dead girl’s chest. He wiped it clean on Oromegon’s tunic before turning and pushing past him.

He turned as he reached the cave’s entrance, pointing the gleaming blade at Nergüi then at Nyla.

‘Get rid of her before I get back,’ he said.

Nergüi watched Nyla’s body tumble down the fissure until it was lost in the red glow of the magma far below. He felt nothing for her; he hadn’t liked her and she hadn’t liked him. So why had she risked a confrontation with Karaamat for him?

No answer presented itself, and he supposed he’d never know.

She was dead and no one would say any words for her. No one would miss her and she would be forgotten within a day. That was the Cthonian way. No ties, no cares, no loyalty.

It was no way to live.

Nergüi turned her knife over in his hand. Too valuable to get rid of – more care than was usual had gone into its making. Its handle had once been a thigh bone, and its grip was carved with thunderbolts originating from a selenite pommel in the shape of a crescent moon.

He could feel the eyes of the clan upon him, but death was so woven into the everyday fabric of the utterdark, that no one thought it strange for him to be dumping a body like this. So callous a disregard for the loss of one of their own sickened Nergüi. That was nothing new, of course; life on Cthonia was nothing to be celebrated or cherished.

Any one of the tribe would place more value on the knife he held than Nyla's life.

The fundamental imbalance of that seethed like a coal in Nergüi's heart.

Everything he had learned and everything he had been taught told him that life in the utterdark was nothing but a brutal struggle for survival. The strong killed the weak. Anything else was meaningless.

It was how things had always been and how they always would be.

Cthonia was dying, but its people would fight till their last breaths to kill each other.

*Where was the sense in that?*

He lifted his head, seeing layers of fumes above him, swirling as they were drawn up through cracks in the ceiling. High above, ancient tunnels, likely bored as ventilation for the deep mines, still pulled currents of air through them, freighted with the hard metallic flavours of the surface. Hints of steel and the biting-on-tin taste of age-old technologies, the tang of archaic sciences.

He felt a shadow move behind him, recognised the scents and sounds of Khageddon.

'Did you kill the girl?' he asked.

'Her name was Nyla.'

'I have already forgotten her name. Did you kill her?'

'No, Karaamat did.'

'Why?'

'Does it matter? Who needs a reason to kill down here?'

'You're right,' agreed Khageddon. 'It doesn't matter.'

Nergüi turned to face the Reivers' Overlord. 'Then why ask?'

'Because *you* think it matters. You seek to find sense and meaning where none exists, to graft higher purpose onto those who have none. The only

purpose we have down here is to fight and kill, to take what we need from those weaker than us. Anything else is irrelevant.'

'I don't believe that,' said Nergüi. 'This world and everyone on it… we used to be part of something, part of something greater than… *this*. Fighting like rats in a cage, killing each other like it doesn't matter who lives or who dies.'

'It *doesn't* matter,' said Khageddon. 'Nothing matters. Not you, not me. Nothing. The struggle is all there is. It is *all* that matters. We fight, we kill and we die. What more does there need to be?'

Nergüi looked back at the rock ceiling through the fumes, imagining his mind's eye flying up through the thin clefts and fissures in the crust of the planet's bedrock that led to the surface.

'We were meant for something more than this,' he said. '*I* was made for something more than this.'

'Perhaps you were,' said Khageddon, placing a hand on his shoulder.

For the briefest second, Nergüi thought the gesture almost paternal.

Then he felt the pressure of the Overlord's grip.

And realised Khageddon was thinking of pushing him into the magma fissure.

He should have been afraid, should have fought to free himself, but Nergüi felt neither fear nor anger, only a weary acceptance of this fate.

*What use was survival when life was worth nothing?*

*Why struggle when only more pain and suffering was the reward?*

The grip on his shoulder tightened, and Nergüi felt a strange tension wracking Khageddon through his palm. It spoke of a struggle within his soul, a war between the desire to push Nergüi to his death, and something… something even he didn't understand.

A bass rumble of shifting rock groaned through the cave, like distant thunder over a far horizon.

Something flashed in the depths of the fissure, like discharge from a power-coupler.

Khageddon's grip loosened on his shoulder. He stepped away from the boy.

Without turning, Nergüi said, 'Why?'

'Cthonia spoke to me,' said Khageddon.

The only light beneath Cthonia was that of fire and crackling spots of

fading lumens left over from the time when men had plumbed its depths for riches. Those days were long gone. The planet's wealth had been stripped away, its deep mines played out, and only scraps remained in the darkest, most lethal cracks of the world.

The empty tunnels and clefts remaining in the rock were bleak and dusty, hung with swaying chains and crusted with ancient machinery too large to scavenge. The walls were knapped like flint where the drills and picks of long-dead pioneers had hacked the rock until Cthonia had nothing left to give.

The planet's once limitless wealth was exhausted.

Now only one resource remained in abundance…

*But to what purpose could such human wretchedness be set?*

Nergüi kept close to the lights, but not too close.

Light meant people, and he was far enough from Reiver territory that those people would all be enemies. Cthonia's inhabitants were forever on the move, so he couldn't be sure to which tribe the lights belonged, and to walk into a rival tribe's camp without a blood-host would be as sure a death sentence as if he leapt blind into a depthless chasm.

Even death alone in the dark would be a kinder end than seeking succour from a tribe not his own.

He climbed ever upwards.

He ascended sheer cliffs of basalt, sprinted across swaying chain bridges while the masked toll-keepers emptied their bowels, and climbed creaking ladders of flaking iron beaten into the rock to pass through hatches long since rusted open.

Every step carried him farther into the unknown reaches of the world.

But still he instinctively knew the way.

Up. Always up.

Children of Cthonia learned to navigate the labyrinthine tunnels as infants.

As infants, they were abandoned in the darkness and left to fend for themselves. A child either found their way back to the clan or they died a slow, agonising death from dehydration, starvation and madness.

By necessity, Nergüi had learned to be fast and to find the hidden paths through Cthonia's bedrock.

Hard-won knowledge that now allowed him to safely cross the territories of the Helleboreae and the pack predator Catulans. He was almost clear of Rukal territory, but with their recent slaughter of the Arosokal and their

rumoured stockpile of supplies, he hoped their legendary bloodlust would be sated for now.

He heard war drums echoing up through fuming splits in a toothed cavern of dripping stalactites.

Angled beams of pale moonlight speared in from cracks in the roof, and crackling rad winds moaned through the stalagmites growing upwards from pools of chalky water.

Hundreds of corpses were impaled on these stalagmites, their ribs peeled back with spears of rock rising up through their chests and their broken limbs hanging limp.

The moisture dripping from above ran down the slack faces of the dead like milky tears, slowly encasing them in a skein of pearlescent minerals and preserving them in the moment of their greatest agony.

This was a trophy cavern of the Justaerin, and typical of their cruelty.

Nergüi paused beside the impaled body of a man whose body was covered in swirling scars and hooded eye tattoos that marked him as one of the Esharkol, a clan that dwelled just below the surface and plundered the ancient ruins. His tattoos curled around cancerous lesions caused by repeated exposure to hard radiation.

The liquid flowing from his bent body was streaked with crimson threads.

A fresh kill, only recently impaled upon the rock.

His eyes flicked open.

‘Boy…’ he gasped, his eyes pleading.

Nergüi backed away from the man. Dying men were apt to drag you down with them.

‘Boy,’ repeated the man, holding out his hand. ‘Your… knife. Give… me.’

‘No,’ said Nergüi.

‘Do it!’ hissed the man. ‘Can’t die… without… weapon in… hand.’

The Esharkol had only moments left to him. Nergüi should move on, leave before the dying man’s cries attracted the attention of the Justaerin.

Nergüi nodded slowly and took out Nyla’s dagger.

‘Yes,’ said the man, blood bubbling from his lips. ‘Give… it…’

Nergüi placed the edge of the knife against the man’s throat and sliced it open.

The man’s eyes widened in shock and anger. His hand clawed the air, and the last spasms of his heart pumped a weak stream of blood over Nergüi’s hand as he pulled the blade clear.

The Esharkol bled out. His limbs convulsed as the light faded from his eyes.

Nergüi lifted his arm. The dagger and his hand were wet with bright blood.

The blade caught the reflected light of the moon, turning it red.

This didn't make him blooded.

He hadn't killed this man in battle, but it was a start.

He found a route to the surface just beyond the Justaerin trophy cave, following a crooked stair that spiralled around a straight-cut shaft filled with iron debris and smashed scaffolding. Nergüi felt his skin prickling as he climbed higher, the temperature rising with every step upwards.

The air tasted of metal and dust, of things best forgotten and abandoned.

Nergüi came to a ladder that climbed a rough-hewn shaft towards a steel plate, crudely welded over a buckled frame. Blue light from the surface seeped in around its broken edges.

He climbed the ladder, peering up through the gap in the plate. Bracing his shoulders against it, he pushed up. He felt it give, but not enough. Too heavy to move completely, but enough of a gap remained for him to squeeze through.

Nergüi stared at the gap. Particulate matter floated in the angled shaft of blue light.

Behind him was darkness and misery, a life of resentment and endless war.

Ahead lay… *what*?

He didn't know. What was he expecting, that a new life would open up before him, that everything he thought he knew of the surface was wrong and that he'd find a purpose beyond the utterdark?

No, he wasn't so foolish as to believe in miracles.

At best, this trip to the surface was a diversion, a temporary escape. A memory to cling to in the days, months and years to come in the unending war of the grim darkness below.

Nergüi smiled. That was *more* than enough.

He pushed up through the steel plate, and hauled himself onto the surface of Cthonia.

The ladder emerged into a wide hangar of hard permacrete floors and steel sheeting.

Broken walls of prefabricated blocks surrounded him on three sides, vitrified to a glasslike finish by some terrible heat. Dust blew in from the

open side, lying in undulant drifts and twisting in wind-blown spirals.

Abandoned ore transporters sat in forlorn ranks, their hoppers empty and their wheels, the smallest of which were taller than a full-grown man, rotted and flat. The high roof of the hangar was all but gone, and the cold blue orb of Cthonia’s star glared down at him from the oil-dark sky. Nergüi shielded his eyes from its piercing light, feeling the heavy radiation already beginning to darken his pallid complexion.

Through the missing wall, Nergüi saw a wasteland like nothing he had ever seen.

Smashed and toppled structures of dark stone and steel surrounded him, remnants of a previous civilisation long gone to dust. Towering mining engines on tracked wheels lay broken open on their sides with ash piled in their windward sides. Looming over this vista of ruin were sagging towers with enormous rotary cable drums at their summits, buckled and leaning as if from ferocious impacts.

Nergüi felt an aching sadness at the sight of what remained of his world.

Emerging from the hangar, the vista of devastation only widened.

Yet this was not the devastation of war, but the wreckage of a place abandoned, like a bond-wife cast aside when bad water and the gradual build-up of toxins eventually turned her womb into a creator of hideous monsters.

The western horizon shimmered with veils of blue, green and gold light that rippled as though the sky were on fire. It made the atmosphere bitter in his lungs: hard, granular and caustic.

He could feel its oily residue coating the inside of his throat with every breath.

The initial pain he’d felt at the surface’s brightness slowly faded as Nergüi walked slowly down the sloped esplanade before the vehicle hangar. Parallel rails, half-buried in grey dust, split and diverged before him. Too large for mining carts, these were wider than two men lying head to toe.

Nergüi tried and failed to imagine the scale of the machine that could travel on such rails.

He moved through the ruins, trying to reconcile what he had been told of the surface with the sights before him now. Nothing within its environs was suited to his human scale, and Nergüi felt as though he had travelled to some distant world where creatures not bound by mortal laws had once ruled.

Everything on the surface – every structure and vehicle, every titanic machine and dormant apparatus – was built for men scaled to the size of gods.

Nergüi paused in his explorations as he heard something beyond the howl of the wind through the ruins. The sound was clearly artificial, rhythmic and persistent, like a machine heart beating on the air itself. Moving deeper into the ruins he saw the stark glow of actinic light.

Light meant people, and you didn't walk into a rival tribe's camp without a blood-host.

But what kind of blood-host could hope to face gods?

None, but perhaps a single individual might pass unnoticed…

He kept to the shadows, calling upon everything he had learned in the depths of Cthonia's darkness.

Eventually, he halted in the shadow of a shattered structure lined with the scavenged shells of hollowed-out machines. He took position behind a ruined section of wall, peering through the corroded pipes of a giant turbine.

Below him was a shallow crater in which sat a squat starship shaped like a flattened cylinder with tall, rectangular drive nacelles at its rear. It stood on splayed legs, and a host of figures worked to remove something from a pit dug into the dusty ground before it. Powerful stab-lights on tripods lit the excavations, but Nergüi couldn't tell what it was they were removing.

Most of the figures were grey-skinned men with metal arms or legs grafted to their bodies, running the gamut from individuals with single augmetic limbs to those that were more like earth-moving engines with human scraps alloyed to their machine hearts.

Towering bipedal walkers stalked the perimeter on oddly jointed legs, plated in curved steel and bearing enormous cannons fitted with colossal ammo hoppers. They bore riders with visors moulded into the form of androgyne gods, equipped with pulsing red eyes that scanned the ruins.

Nergüi knew that to attract their notice would be to die.

Overseers in crimson robes stitched with golden cogs directed the work parties, and Nergüi had never seen their like before: chimerics of machine and man that communicated in grating barks, like hand-cranked alarm sirens that warned a tribe of intruders. Flitting, obsidian skulls darted overhead, screeching at one another in whistling pops and clicks.

'What are you?' he whispered.

He turned his attention to the object they were excavating. He still couldn’t see exactly what it was, something around three metres long and cylindrical, tapered at one end. Dust from the excavators obscured the object, as did the robed overseers, but a glimpse of carved thunderbolts on its golden skin triggered a sudden jolt of recall he could not understand.

Nergüi started to rise from his cover behind the dead turbine, but caught himself just in time.

Pebbles skittered down the slope, and he ducked back as one of the bipedal strider machines paused in its circuit of the perimeter. Its long-barrelled cannon swung around and targeting beams pulsed into his hiding place.

He kept utterly still, hardly daring to breathe.

The beams widened and narrowed their focus as they swept through the space, rotating and filling it with light. Nergüi had no real idea what the light was doing, but the instinct of the hunted kept him immobile.

At last the beams ceased their probing and Nergüi released his breath.

He risked a glance through the pipework down into the crater and was relieved to see the giant machine continue in its marching stride.

In the time he had kept still, the robed overseers had removed the golden object from the ground and were even now escorting it aboard their ship. It was gone before he could see it again properly, but the reverence with which these people were treating it suggested it was a relic or object of great import.

Nergüi heard the crunch of stone the instant before the whining build-up of energy.

He spun on his heel in time to see a hooded figure in red robes with a long-rifle at its shoulder.

Its eyes were twin spots of pale blue light, and the heavy grained wood of its rifle was in stark contrast to the intricate machinery of the weapon’s firing mechanism.

Fear clamped hard on Nergüi’s heart and the breath caught in his throat.

He dived to the side as the air between them buckled with a discharge of energy.

The brick wall behind Nergüi exploded into dust and fragments. Red-hot pieces of pipework spun away like blades. Nergüi rolled and ran for cover as the rifleman fired again. The same blue of his eyes beamed from an underslung gemlight.

Nergüi slid into cover behind a detached fan, each of its blades as wide as

he was tall.

The robed figure pumped shot after shot in Nergüi's wake, blasting bronzed chunks of fire-edged metal from the ancient fan. Portions of it fell away, clattering to the permacrete in a deafening rain of debris. Nergüi scooped up a handful of the dust, bolts and washers scattering on the floor.

Braying squawks of alarm sounded from the crater below.

Nergüi heard the swift *snap-click* of a magazine change, instantly followed by the building whine of the weapon's firing mechanism.

He spun around the fan blade, Nyla's bone-handled dagger held low in his right hand.

The shooter swung his rifle to bear and pulled the trigger.

The beam grazed Nergüi's shoulder, burning a fiery line across his flesh.

He roared and hurled himself at the figure. The impact was like running into a support pillar, but the two of them fell to the ground in a thrashing, jabbing tangle of limbs.

The figure swung the butt of its rifle. It cracked painfully against Nergüi's skull. He rolled with the blow and spat blood into his enemy's glowing blue eyes. The light flickered and Nergüi used its momentary distraction to drive Nyla's dagger up into the thing's armpit.

It slid across overlapping bands of armour, but pierced the weaker flexseal.

He felt the tip dig into meat and sinew and pushed with all his strength.

A horrible machine scream issued from beneath the thing's hood. Nergüi drove the blade in deeper, seeking vital organs as he churned the dagger's grip like he was working a crank.

Something ruptured deep inside the figure, and a stinking wash of black blood gushed over Nergüi.

His foe shuddered and stopped moving, as if his life had simply switched off.

Nergüi rolled from the suddenly still body and dragged the blade from his enemy's chest cavity.

The sound of his own breath bellowed in lungs that suddenly felt too full of air. His heart was pounding with a nightmarish double beat that sounded impossibly loud.

He scrambled to his feet, hearing the heavy thump of the striding machines' iron footfalls.

He scooped up the fallen warrior's rifle and ran, the stock and trigger still sticky with oily blood.

More of the strobing blue targeting beams painted the air, and this time he was powerless to avoid them. He heard the chiming of a brass bell and howling brays of triumph. Crackling bursts of the strange language of static chased him.

*A warning? A command?*

Nergüi knew he could not escape. Too much open ground lay between him and safety.

Resolved to his death, he stopped and turned to look back at his pursuers.

If he couldn't escape, he would fight.

'Because fighting and killing is what you do down in the utterdark,' said Nergüi.

Two of the striding machines had him cold, their terrible weapons aimed right at him. One of the robed figures stood between the two machines. A host of serpentine cable-arms drifted at its back.

Nergüi lifted the stolen rifle to his wounded shoulder, where the scorched flesh was already healing. His blood thickened and the heat beneath his skin signalled that its preternatural ability to repair itself was already underway.

Another strange scar to add to his collection.

'You fight so hard they *have* to kill you.'

He pulled the trigger and a searing green bolt spat from the weapon.

A discharge of ghost-light enveloped the robed figure, and the bolt dissipated before it reached him.

Nergüi squeezed the trigger again and again, each shot dead on target, each impact absorbed by the invisible energy field. He fired until the weapon coughed empty.

'You fight until your gun runs dry,' said Nergüi, slinging the enemy warrior's rifle over his shoulder and pulling out Nyla's dagger.

'You fight until your knife dulls and snaps, until your fists are broken.'

The ammo hoppers on the back of the striders clattered as scores of shells were fed into the giant weapons. The blue targeting beams swept over him again, penetrating his flesh so that they might know his every weakness. All the better to kill him.

'You only lay down when your heart stops beating,' said Nergüi.

With his free hand, he pulled out the two mirror coins on the cord hung around his neck.

Khageddon had given them to him, said they'd come from the eyes of his adoptive father.

Nergüi lifted the looped cord over his head, holding them out for his killers to see.

‘After you kill me, place these upon my eyes,’ he said.

The twisting coins caught the light of the blue sun, the metal smooth and polished.

The robed figure crackled a command, and the tall striders lowered their weapons.

To Nergüi’s amazement, they slowly turned and walked away.

The figure beckoned to him.

Nergüi shook his head. The figure beckoned again.

Nergüi turned and ran.

And this time he didn’t look back.

Khageddon turned the rifle over in his hands, admiring the workmanship of the trigger mechanism, the toothed cog symbol on its cheek plate, and the perfectly machined balance of the weapon.

‘You killed the one who bore this?’

‘I did,’ replied Nergüi proudly.

He stood before his tribe, a man at last, holding himself tall for what felt like the first time in his life.

The light from the magma fissure illuminated Khageddon’s face and the faces of the tribal braves surrounding them. Karaamat, Oromegon and Barsine watched, incredulous, as Khageddon lifted the rifle to his shoulder and sighted along the barrel with a grunt. Oil-burning lamps hung from the cavern ceiling, rocking back and forth in response to some distant movement in the rock.

‘You killed one of the blue-eyed ghouls on the *surface*?’

‘Yes.’

‘How? How did you kill him?’ said Khageddon, running a finger through the black residue on the rifle’s stock.

‘I spied upon their excavations,’ said Nergüi. ‘But they heard me, and one of their sentries almost surprised me. But I charged him, knocked him down.’

Nergüi pulled out Nyla’s dagger, its blade still coated with black liquid.

‘We struggled and I got the blade in under his armour. Drove it in good and deep. Then he died.’

Khageddon licked his finger, running the black tip over his lips.

‘This blood is not a man’s blood,’ said the Overlord, dropping the rifle at his feet as though it were a poisonous rock-eel. ‘It is the vitae-fluid of a *machine*. All you have done is bring death down upon us.’

‘I don’t understand,’ said Nergüi, feeling his earlier hope fading like the light in the impaled Esharkol’s eyes as he’d cut his throat. The rocking motion of the lamps overhead increased, and a low rumbling set Nergüi’s teeth on edge.

‘You brought that weapon to me, thinking I would blood you, that you had earned a kill-name?’

‘I *have*,’ insisted Nergüi. ‘I–’

Khageddon didn’t let him finish. He backhanded Nergüi across the face.

The impact drove him down onto one knee.

Once, that would have been enough to cow him, to keep him down on the ground in shame.

But the shedding of blood, whether in mercy or survival, had changed Nergüi.

It had touched something deep inside him, interacting with some hitherto unknown element like a reagent and igniting a newfound fire in his soul.

The roof of the cave shook, and veils of dust drifted downwards. A lamp fell from its hook, crashing to the floor in an explosion of glass and fire.

Murmurs of unease passed through the cave as a rumbling tremor rose from the fissure.

Red light bloomed in the deeps.

Nergüi wiped blood from his lip with the back of his hand.

He gripped the handle of Nyla’s blade tight and rose to his full height.

Once, Khageddon had seemed like the most powerful among them, a killer supreme. An invincible warrior who would lead the Reivers to greatness, who would one day break the chains of the wretched existence that bound them in the darkness of ignorance and bloodshed.

But Nergüi now saw him for what he truly was: just another petty and bloodthirsty tyrant unworthy of devotion.

Khageddon saw the threshold crossed within him and nodded slowly.

‘It is time,’ he said, looking up as the roof of the cavern shook once more. ‘Do it, *no-name*. Do it, and earn your kill-name in my blood.’

Nergüi stepped in close and rammed Nyla’s dagger up under Khageddon’s breastbone. It cut through the wet-meat resistance of muscle and organs, scraping against his ribs as it clove the man’s heart.

The ground shook as Nergüi twisted the blade.

A catastrophic amount of blood gushed from the wound.

More sprayed from Khageddon's mouth as a wide crack split the cavern roof like tectonic plates shifting. Something colossal punched through the crack with a deafening howl of metal tearing rock.

A conical drill head screamed as it forced its bulk into the cavern.

The thing was scored and burned from its passage through the planet's bedrock, its sides caked in ash and dust. But the toothed cog symbol on its emerging armoured flanks was unmistakable.

Khageddon had been right. He *had* brought death down upon them.

Warriors scattered as cascades of rubble and rock fell in a deadly rain of splintered stone.

Khageddon sank to his knees, the life pouring out of him with every second.

They went down together, embracing like a loving father and dutiful son.

The Overlord's head fell forward onto Nergüi's shoulders.

'I… give you… a… name,' he said through teeth gritted in agony.

'My kill-name?' said Nergüi.

Khageddon nodded and whispered in Nergüi's ear. A word, a *name*.

No longer was he Nergüi, the *no-name*.

The word spoken, Khageddon's face relaxed, as though he had passed on some terrible burden.

He smiled and looked up at the cavern roof with a strange, wistful expression. And with his last breath he said, 'It took me a lifetime to learn how to die.'

Khageddon's arms fell limp, and he toppled backwards, sliding down the slope towards the fissure.

A moment's regret touched the boy as he watched the man who had shaped him more than almost any other disappear from sight, but the feeling vanished with the next beat of his heart.

He stood and looked upon the world with fresh eyes.

The cave was collapsing and his tribe were dying, but he felt curiously calm.

*He knew who he was now.*

That understanding blew life over a spark deep in the very heart of him.

A spark that had always been there, smouldering in the darkness and on the edge of extinction, but which now roared back to life with a vengeance.

Knowledge flooded him: visions of a hostile galaxy of a billion worlds and uncounted civilisations.

At its heart was the ancient birthrock of humanity, a war-weary world ruled by a golden lord who sat His lonely vigil atop a soaring tower set among snow-mantled peaks at the roof of the world.

The lord looked up from His contemplation and smiled.

+It is time.+

Three simple words, but they were the key to unlocking the sleeping power within him. It unfolded in waves of surging, raw emotions; consuming the *no-name* boy he had been and rewriting him.

Long-dormant genes awoke and began their miraculous work.

Synapses within his mind blazed as fresh connections were forged.

Bones and organs swelled with new purpose. His body surged, all flesh ripe with ambition, as a vast and unknowable anatomical shift took place within him. Veins and arteries burned phosphor-bright trails across his numinous flesh as his old self was shed like a serpent’s skin too small to contain its apotheosis.

It was agonising, this rebirth, every cell of his body ripped apart and wrought anew. It ferociously remade him without a care for his suffering, tearing him down and rebuilding his form as it was always meant to be. The pain was beyond what any living soul could endure and his mind began to collapse under the onslaught.

He threw back his head and howled as fire blazed from his outstretched arms.

And then it was over.

He fell to his knees as the sound and fury of the cavern’s destruction roared back to life around him.

Titanic boulders and pulverised slabs of splintered rock were crashing down in a murderous rain. Choking clouds of dust hid the carnage, but he heard the screams of the hurt and the dying. Rocks smacked his shoulder, drawing impossibly vivid blood and shattering the collarbone beneath.

Another slammed into his forehead. His vision swam red.

Blood streamed down his face. It didn’t matter.

*He knew who he was now.*

He breathed in ash and fire, tasted the metallic flavour of his own life. Crackling bolts of gunfire echoed strangely amid the thunderous sound of the cavern’s collapse.

*Galvanic weaponry*, he thought, unsurprised he knew the term.

More rocks and debris struck him and he fell onto his back.

A strange lethargy suffused him, as though his body – exhausted from the business of transformation – were shutting down.

He smiled as his vision greyed and the sounds of death and destruction grew remote.

None of it mattered now.

*He knew who he was.*

He heard iron-shod footsteps approaching and looked up to see a red-robed figure standing above him with a long-barrelled rifle that hummed with unearthly power.

A pair of blue eyes burned cold beneath a scarlet hood.

‘I have the boy.’

His hand shot out to enfold the hooded figure’s neck.

An alarmed blurt of machine language crackled from the bronze-grilled augmitter at its throat.

With only a little pressure, he crushed the blue-eyed warrior’s spine.

‘My name is… *Horus*!’

*OceanofPDF.com*

# THE SIXTH CULT OF THE DENIED

David Guymer

*OceanofPDF.com*

*No one knew how deep the Great Ocean went. No one had ever tried to gauge how far into the unknown its outer limits might extend. There were those who believed the Ocean to be infinite. Others argued that it did not exist at all outside of metaphor.*

*Neither interpretation satisfied the seeker of knowledge.*

*They were intellectually lazy, and functionally meaningless. The knowable universe, too, was often said to be infinite – but what did that mean? What mysteries might be discovered as one approached its non-existent edge? All questions had their answers in the Great Ocean, if one was prepared to risk all to seek them.*

*He knew that, and had deemed the price of his enlightenment fair.*

*Only a promise, made to his father, had kept him from shedding his body of flesh and voyaging in the Ocean as long as he had.*

*But then, revelation always resides in the last place one looks…*

Hakoris restructured the wards over his temporary sanctum, and descended the mosaicked steps towards the peristyle.

There had once been a functioning water fountain in the central garden, but bomb damage had clogged it. Work gangs of local labourers, servitors

and penal companies of Prosperine Spireguard, exhorted in their good work by a junior iterator, worked to clear away the rubble. The old villa, once the townhouse of a powerful member of 28-18's feudal elite, one of the so-called Resource Barons, was clad in scaffolding. Automata cranes were clamped to the bombed-out corner walls like vultures, flak batteries and communications vanes sprouting from what remained of the emerald roof tiles almost by the hour.

The proximity of so many conflicting auras unsettled Hakoris' humours, and he reached for the first order of Enumerations to rebalance his thoughts.

His practicus, Djet, the most senior and able of his apprentices, waited on him at the bottom of the steps. He stood in a small, self-actuated circle of order, holding a marl clay amphora of Tizcan sweet wine in one hand and the force sword *Rahtep*, in its jewelled scabbard, over the opposite shoulder like a probationer's satchel. He offered the amphora first.

Hakoris waved it away, feeling a queasiness in his gut that was, given his altered physiology, entirely psychological. He almost laughed. He had duelled with aeldari warlocks, fought the native predators of the Great Ocean and bled on the fields of Bezant, and today he was nervous.

With a flutter of power, Djet summoned one of the house servants to his side. The woman took the amphora from him, blinked, unsure what had possessed her to do such a thing, and then ventured off in the direction of the kitchens.

When she was gone, Hakoris did laugh, and honoured his practicus with a bow.

'Wonderful,' he said. 'You dipped your hand into the Great Ocean, and even I barely noticed.'

Djet looked at his feet.

'Thank you, lord.'

He had been born Danjareth, to the plainspeople of 28-9, but had since adopted the more Prosperine pseudonym Djet as his own. He was eight years old and had been apprentice to Hakoris for five. He was also gifted. Many of the children tithed from Magnus the Red's ninth conquest had proven to be so, although nobody in the Legion had been able to explain why. Traditionally, a probationer attended on his Fellowship's Magisteria on the ninth day of the ninth month of his ninth year to be tested on his knowledge of the *Liber Throa*, but given the vagaries of warp travel, astropathic communication and relativistic time this was seldom exact.

Hakoris put his huge, giant's hand on the boy's shoulder. Djet was too young to flinch under his touch, which Hakoris appreciated more than he might have thought he would.

'I will confer with the Magisteria after the forum,' he said.

'Thank you, lord,' Djet muttered again, and with downcast eyes presented his master's sword.

*Rahtep* had been a gift from the primarch himself, two metres of rarefied Tizcan steel, crystal inlay and psyk-reactive circuitry. The pommel piece was a multifaceted piece of crystal from the Reflecting Caves beneath Tizca. The scabbard was of sumptuous red leather, decorated with lapis lazuli and carnelian with runes picked out in gold leaf and thread. Bearing it was both an honour and a penance – the symbol of office, in his own mind, for a dreamless brotherhood that none now dared speak of. Not even the primarch. And not Hakoris. Mortal muscle was not enough to lift such a blade. Not for a boy of eight.

Once again, Hakoris found himself impressed.

He bowed his head low and took the proffered blade.

Djet circled around to buckle the sword belt around Hakoris' waist.

Two more XV legionaries passed under the peristyle from the vestibule, their sandalled feet crunching on the debris of the fallen ceiling. Both warriors had the golden skin and blue-green eyes of trueborn sons of Prospero, clad in pleated, knee-length *shendyt* with golden buckles, and open tunics that exposed the huge pectoral and abdominal slabs of transhuman muscle. Khaleif, the younger of the two, but the more melancholic by far, gave a salute. It was a brief, minimalist affair that could only have passed between fellow scholars and friends. Nepfithu would have done the same, had he not had his arms full with a bushel of hand-written grimoires. A hundred carefully rolled papyrus scrolls hung from the hem of his shendyt on wires. He looked tired, dark rings around his eyes.

'I could not rest,' said Nepfithu, grinning.

'Studying all night,' said Hakoris, and shook his head. 'It is a symposia, brother. It is not a test.'

Khaleif grunted. 'There is always a test.'

'We will make them see the truth,' said Nepfithu.

'No,' said Hakoris. 'We will show it to them. And then they will know it for themselves.'

Nepfithu grinned.

Khaleif shrugged.

‘What?’ said Hakoris.

He knew these two warriors as well as he knew anyone, which was not very well at all. He had never sought company and since… *since his return*, company had rarely sought to engage with him.

‘I wonder if this is too soon,’ said Khaleif. ‘We have many theories. Little proof.’

‘We have proof,’ said Nepfithu.

‘To persuade the converted,’ said Khaleif, pointedly.

‘I do not seek the validation of my peers,’ said Hakoris, softly. He looked up, as if to announce that he was not speaking to himself. ‘I want only to understand how the Thousand Sons were saved.’

Djet stepped back from him, finished.

‘Why this, my lord?’ he said, and immediately flushed as Nepfithu and Khaleif both stared at him and Hakoris turned around. ‘I mean… why that and nothing else?’

Nepfithu and Khaleif looked abashed.

Hakoris gave genuine consideration to answering.

His humours really were out of balance.

He advanced to the second order of Enumerations.

‘Come,’ he said. ‘I would not want to be late for my own symposia.’

The city of Therebarg was a pseudo-medieval capitolis with a population of about a hundred thousand, the nominal centre of a rudimentary continental empire and the seat of government for the Resource Barons, who had carved it up between them. It was an unplanned sprawl of tight-knit streets, developed over unchanging centuries for the needs of equine traffic and peasant handcarts. Dedicated Compliance officers were hard at work widening a handful of prime arterials to accept STC vehicles, and the new plan that was emerging, based on the Prosperine geometries, was both simple and beautiful. A select few trade halls and villas remained intact, eight grand structures that, by accident or design, formed a perfect alignment around the central shape of a huge, reflective pyramid. The Great Pyramid of Photep, in Tizca, was its model and, though but a fraction of its size and otherworldly presence, the Pyramid of Theret, as it had begun to be called, would nevertheless be a wonder of the subsector when it was completed.

The Thereans had resisted the XV Legion, but only after their own fashion. Their rulership was feudal, their armies disunited and primitively equipped. They were so ignorant of their place in the universe they did not even have a name for their world.

Most Imperial personnel called it Thera, or simply made do with 28-18.

The damage to the city had actually occurred after the conflict, such as it had been.

Magnus the Red had looked upon it and decided that its people deserved better.

Leaving the convalescent capitolis behind them, Hakoris, Khaleif, Nepfithu and young Djet – running along in their wake – crossed onto the high causeway to the Pyramid of Theret.

Four hundred metres high. Six hundred from corner to corner. The bulk of its construction was limestone, hewn from the planet's own quarries and transported here, but the cladding was Tizcan porphyry and blown glass, each plate hand-engraved by probationers of the XV. Scores of tutelaries, figments of the Great Ocean invisible to those without the aether-sight, flocked the electrum *benbenet* of its capstone, frolicking in the ley lines across which the great pyramid had been set like fish behind a dam. Hakoris' own familiar, Saponet, was amongst them. There was Neiru, Nepfithu's tutelary: exuberant, ambitious, vibrant; all vivid primary hues and unsubtle energies. And Iset, Khaleif's: a fan of rainbow-tinted gold who was cautious in the pyramid's bow waves where the other tutelaries were bold. Most Thousand Sons thought of the tutelaries as interesting, and occasionally useful curiosities. To those few scholars who took an interest, they were fragments of the primordial Creator, manifestations of a legionary's personality reflected from the surface of the Ocean the way light is reflected by physical water. The creatures were devoted to their masters and inherently tame, closer to friends or confidantes than pets.

Hakoris knew better.

And knowledge, as always, made the truth even more wondrous.

Warriors of the First Fellowship *Sekhmet* stood along the causeway at intervals determined by numerological constants and deep arithmetic, each one armed and armoured, as still and as perfect as the shabtis of the Order of the Jackal, encased in crimson ceramite and gold.

Hakoris nodded to them as he strode past.

He knew many of their names, and they knew him, even if he did not

know them personally.

‘The work is almost complete,’ said Khaleif, nodding towards the pyramid.

Hakoris did not know how his philosophus could tell, but geometry had always been Khaleif’s second love. After his studies of the Great Ocean, and before the arts of war.

‘Soon we will leave this world behind us,’ he agreed.

Nepfithu grinned. ‘But it will be remembered.’

Hakoris watched the tutelaries at play, and in spite of his unease, their gaiety made him smile.

‘It looks as though a great many of the Thousand Sons have come to debate our work.’

Khaleif squinted, the dazzling coronae of energies playing about the apex of the pyramid proving too much for genhanced vision and for aether-sight. ‘Sobek. Aaetpio. Paeoc. Utipa. Sioda.’

‘By Terra’s beacon,’ said Nepfithu. ‘Their masters are here?’

‘It will be a rare forum,’ said Hakoris.

Nepfithu shook his head and chuckled at Hakoris’ understatement.

Khaleif frowned.

‘Who?’ said Djet, behind them. ‘Who has come?’

‘You will see, boy,’ said Nepfithu.

Entrance to the Pyramid of Theret was by a golden pylon wide enough for an Atept-se 17 Night Rake interceptor to taxi through. A single legionary waited for them beneath the elaborate cartouche on the horizontal. Like them he was unarmoured, clad in a long, hooded robe that was so fine as to be almost transparent. A force sword lay belted at his hip. He carried a crook-like reliquary staff. The warrior raised a hand, as if in greeting and one tutelary from the flock descended like a hawk recalled to its glove. It faded into the creases of its master’s robes as soon as it landed, and even before it had fully vanished Hakoris had quite forgotten that it was there.

‘You are late,’ the robed warrior said. ‘I feared that some last minute distraction had claimed you.’

Nepfithu snorted. The robed legionary bowed to him, and to Khaleif. They returned the bow, deeper.

‘I would not miss this forum for any other prize,’ said Hakoris.

‘No,’ the warrior sighed. ‘I do not believe that you would.’

The legionary drew back his hood.

His bald head was heavily tattooed with Prosperine hieroglyphs of obscure

reference and a number of geometrical motifs. The deep lines of great age carved his face, and he wore a short beard that was equal parts silver-grey and black. His eyes were hard, but Hakoris felt they belied a hidden sadness. Like Hakoris, the magister preferred his solitude, to hold himself and his humours apart from his brothers. And so Hakoris had never pried.

‘Thank you for arranging this symposium,’ he said, bowing his head. ‘It will not be forgotten, Magister Amon.’

*The Great Ocean was almost impossible to study directly. In the same way that a quantum particle could not be explained until it was assayed, the Ocean did not exist until it was observed, and it was defined by its observer. He sought knowledge, and so knowledge was what it gave him. Knowledge made corporeal. A maze of it. A labyrinth.*

*A translation cypher for the infamous Voynich Codex.*

*An entire missing row of periods for the table of elements.*

*Thirty-five unknown plays by the Shakspire.*

*The secrets of the Aeldari Fall.*

*The knowledge of the Old Ones, lost to the War in Heaven.*

*The nature of reality itself.*

*All he had to do was dive into that trove and the knowledge would be his. He could have explored that cavern of wonders forever, but he forced his spirit to look beyond it. There was one treasure that he sought to the exclusion of all others.*

*Days, weeks, years, endless quanta of infinity, he spent in increasing frustration, discarding lore that would have altered the path of galaxies had it but been known. But the one jewel of wisdom he sought was not there.*

*The beacon set by his acolytes in the universe of the physical grew faint already, but even as he heeded it he gathered his body of light to go deeper still…*

The pyramid’s interior was laid out in accordance with ancient principles, the numerical series and golden means of the *Liber Abaci*. A Grand Gallery descended steeply from the entrance pylon to the centre of the pyramid’s geometries. From this Chamber of Possibilities, seven subordinate passages diverged into a glittering complex of libraries, contemplation chambers and scriptoria. The eighth passage was a vertical shaft, leading to a small chamber sited directly beneath the benbenet capstone. An observatory into the realm aetheric, oriented to the psychic flows and empyreal currents of

28-18 the way an optical telescope was to the magnetic field lines and spectral pollution of its parent world.

The XV did not labour over liberated peoples with the same love or zeal as Lorgar's XVII, but nor would they leave a legacy of cratered and embittered worlds in their wake.

The Pyramid of Theret would be a citadel of enlightenment, and when Magnus the Red did finally deem it right for the Legion to move on to conquests new, it would be to leave behind a gleaming citadel of Compliance, the foundations of its prosperity driven deep by the Thousand Sons.

The Chamber of Possibilities had been laid down as an example of paradigm geometries. Shift one's perspective, alter one's expectation, and the circular parquetry of its floor seamlessly became a pattern of interlocking triangles, pentagrams and so on towards a shape of infinite sides. Look again and it was an enneagram, a nine-pointed star, a trinity of trinities, a model of the human psyche through nine archetype personalities. The ceiling was an elaborate cartouche: Imperial Ankh, Nor'Hion, Ament'Ret, Ouroboros, all enclosed within the Eye of Magnus. The triumph of knowledge over the infinite. Seating was arranged in tiers. There was ample space for two hundred learned warriors and yet, with the exception of a handful of robed legionaries in the mezzanine and upper tiers, the chamber was almost empty.

Hakoris frowned.

Where were the scholars, the remembrancers, the lorekeepers of the Red Orders? Where was the Legion's army of lay scholars, minute-takers and scribes?

Nepfithu looked around at the empty seating. 'Is this it?'

One of the seated warriors rose. 'You have not been given leave to speak.'

'This is a free symposium, brother,' said Hakoris, folding his arms over his chest and raising his voice to reach the speaker.

'Is that what you think this is?'

Walking so softly that Hakoris was unaware of him until he felt the hand on his shoulder, Amon gestured towards the perfectly spherical 'eye' at the centre of the parquetry's convergent geometries. The touch on his back was enough to start him towards it. Amon, meanwhile, walked towards a seat in the front row. He moved like a warrior. But when he sat it was as an old man.

‘What is this?’ Hakoris asked him from the centre of the nine-pointed star.

Amon did not answer.

‘Now we can begin.’ The warrior who had spoken earlier to chastise Nepfithu drew back his hood. ‘Azhek Ahriman. Magister Templi of the Corvidae.’

A second warrior rose. ‘Phosis T’kar,’ he growled. ‘Magister Templi of the Raptora.’

One by one, the seated legionaries rose to announce themselves.

‘Hathor Maat. Magister Templi of the Pavoni.’

‘Baleq Uthizzar. Magister Templi of the Athanaeans.’

‘Kalophis. Magister Templi of the Pyrae.’

Amon spoke without standing. ‘You know who I am.’ He bowed his head. ‘Brother.’

Hakoris’ lips threatened a grimace.

He dipped his head in the proper attitude of respect for the *Rehati*, the cadre of senior officers appointed by Magnus himself.

This was hardly the grand symposium that Amon had led him to expect, and yet… here he stood before the Magisters of the five Great Cults and the equerry of Magnus the Red. Someone took his investigations into the true nature of the Great Ocean seriously, even if it did not look as though they would be getting the hearing he had wished for just yet.

‘And I am Aqhet Hakoris,’ he said, rising from his bow. ‘Magister Templi of the Aquilae.’

Kalophis snorted.

T’kar chuckled. ‘Now *that*, brother, is why you are here.’

‘I overstep, I know,’ Hakoris conceded. ‘Once I have spoken, you will know why.’

‘You would have us recognise a sixth Cult,’ said Ahriman.

‘I would.’

‘The architects of Tizca will need to find room for a sixth pyramid,’ said Maat.

The Rehati chuckled at that. With the exception of Amon. He remained diffidently interested, as though he watched rather than listened.

Hakoris stiffened. ‘I have read the Great Library’s copy of the *Diologo*, the *Commentariolus*, and *A Speciei Originem*. Have you, brothers? Had you, then you would know that this would hardly be the first time that a new discovery has upset an established order.’

Amon’s eyebrow lifted.

Ahriman frowned, but he was no longer laughing.

‘And you believe that you have made this discovery. Aqhet Hakoris. Captain of the Ninth Fellowship’s Amenta-Ninety-Nine Circle. You claim this undertaking that had eluded our ancient Prosperine forebears and evaded the *Pesedjet* of Magnus the Red.’

‘And when did we first conceive the primarch to be all-knowing and all-seeing?’ Hakoris answered sharply. ‘The moment we do, do we not render ourselves redundant? Why not then resign ourselves to our basic purpose as instruments of war?’ He waved his hand dismissively over the tiers of empty seats that overlooked him. ‘And leave higher notions of philosophy, science and art to the arch-magus and the ipssisumus Himself.’ He looked up into silence. ‘Well?’

‘*They have no answer for you, Captain Hakoris.*’

There was a crack, like the thunder of Zaeus of Grekan legend, as a staff of onyx and ormolu struck the ground, and like the birth flare of the universe Magnus the Red now stood where Magnus the Red had not been before. Hakoris looked helplessly upon his gene-father. Colours had never before been as vibrant. The physical plane had never been more *manifest*. The primarch was a supernova encased in golden ceramite, an elaborate harness of curling horns, sculpted muscles and esoteric calligraphy designed to contain the physicality of a being that rejected all such constraints. His face was a collage of every thought and emotion ever experienced by man. His hair was a wild shock of crimson, bound by a spectrum of precious metals that was more a rainbow than it was a crown. Every speck of light that reflected from his armour was a star. Plates of turquoise leather were woven into his war-plate to form pteruges and a kilt that hung to his knees, and *Ahn-Nunurta*, the sickle-bladed force sword of the Prosperine god of war, lay in a belt of silksteel at his waist.

Khaleif and Nepfithu were already on bended knee.

Djet was weeping.

The boy would have been aware of Magnus’ presence in the system; to any open mind it would have been as palpable as light or gravity. But this was the first time he had *witnessed* the glory of a primarch and Hakoris had first-hand experience of how powerful an experience that could be.

Hakoris simply bowed his head, averting tear-filled eyes as Magnus the Red set his staff on the parquetry geometry and drew a complicated symbol

across the ground.

‘I invoke the Symbol of Thutmose,’ said Magnus, twisting his staff clockwise and then withdrawing it from the invisible sigil like a key from a lock.

The drawn rune flashed briefly, and Hakoris moaned as the world around him dulled. The tides of the Great Ocean withdrew, and he felt a negative pressure on his mind as it pressed against the confines of his skull. The braziers mounted on the wall burned sulkily. Textures became flat, patterns meaningless, faces empty. Hakoris looked up at the Magisters Templi, but they had become unreadable to him, as if the entire chamber had faded apart from him. His body felt numb.

Hakoris had once, briefly, shared a warzone with an Excruciatus cadre of the Emperor’s Silent Sisterhood. Their existence, just ten kilometres away, had been like being stabbed repeatedly in the heart and the eyes. Being caught under the Symbol of Thutmose was like being trapped under a thick blanket or a heavy net: uncomfortable, deeply unnerving, but bearable.

Of all the potent psykers gathered in the Chamber of Possibilities, only Magnus himself continued to sputter with aetheric potency.

‘Of that which is spoken within these walls there will be no record, except for that which is written here.’ The primarch’s hand dropped to the colossal tome of arcane lore, the *Book of Magnus*, that hung from his belt by a chain beside his sword. ‘And here.’ He tapped a long, tapering nail on his crimson brow. ‘I command every soul herein to secrecy, unless my final judgement be to recant that instruction.’

‘I… do not understand, lord,’ said Hakoris, struggling to recall how to speak without his connection to the many voices of the Great Ocean. ‘I am here to share my discoveries of the Ocean’s true nature with the Legion.’

Sweeping out a long cloak of crimson feathers, Magnus took a seat beside his equerry.

Amon was a blank face and a hollow stare under the Symbol of Thutmose.

‘You were right, my son,’ said Magnus. ‘I am not all-knowing, and nor am I all-seeing. But there is much that I do see, and much more that I know. You are not here to share your discoveries. You are here to account for them.’

*Deeper into the Great Ocean than he had ever gone in the company of his father, a new kind of predator lurked. They looked like nothing at all until*

*he drew close, formless threats until he arrived at the conscious decision to enter their waters. They circled like the sharks of Terra's prehistoric seas, and more, a protean blending of primeval terrors from the deepest reaches of Old Earth and a hostile cosmos with an inborn antipathy to intelligent life. The seeker of knowledge had studied broadly and travelled widely in coming this far, and few minds were as open to the true nature of the universe as his: he could conceive of horrors that few others would dare apprehend, and the weird plasticity of the Ocean readily obliged the Domains of Life conjured by his imaginings.*

*Teeth. Frills. Suckers. Barbs.*

*Spots. Stripes. Exotic chromatophores. Mimetic displays.*

*There were saurid giants. Club-wielding primates with murderous grins. Carnivorous swarms of insects, piranhas, and psychneuein.*

*Without the power of his father to repel them, they did not hesitate long before making their attack. The seeker did not command the mastery of his father, but he was not without some might of his own.*

*Anger rose in his thoughts, and he shaped it into a sword of crimson fire that he swept through a manifestation of hunger with the head and body of a shark and the limbs of a wolf. A squid-like malfeasance spread to envelop him with its tendrils. It was of an order beneath him, and with a thought he made it literally so, reworking their relative dimensions until it was insignificant enough for him to crush in one hand. Like air towards a vacuum the denizens of the Great Ocean rushed at him. Too many to destroy. He roared his frustration into the Ocean, and destruction rolled from him in waves.*

*Where was the answer that he sought?*

*He felt the tug on his astral cord as his acolytes, sensing his peril, sought to recall him. His body of light had never spent so long abroad of its physical host, ventured so far or fought so hard.*

*But to retreat now would be to surrender the knowledge he sought forever. This was a fact that he understood without any grounding in logic or facts. Such was the nature of the Great Ocean. It answered to symbolism, ritual and sacrifice. It rewarded peril.*

*Brandishing his sword of anger, he armoured himself in hard plates of determination.*

*He would sooner lose everything than fail here.*

‘Account for them?’ said Hakoris, struggling to marshal his dismay with the dampening power of the Symbol of Thutmose throbbing over his Enumerations, and faring poorly. He pinched his temples, shook his head to clear it. ‘When have the boundaries of what can be learned ever been proscribed? The human mind did not evolve to be shackled. No. Rather, it seeks to throw off ignorance whenever it finds it. And if, when it does, it discovers something true then humanity, the universe as a whole, is richer for its perseverance. We lend our arms to the Great Crusade, lord, but *this*…’ He tapped his throbbing temple, realised he had been pacing his small triangle of parquetry and stopped. He gave a swift bow to reaffirm his deference. ‘This is the true battle that needs to be waged. If mankind is to be the master of all his faculties, to never again slide into the darkness of ignorance and strife.’

Magnus sat back, his hands coming together into an anjali mudra. It was a brief note, a single, silent character of applause, before he steepled his fingers and set them across his lips. The Magisters Templi had become phantoms in the high seating. Even Amon had become a dim shade beside the primarch’s coronal grandeur.

Stare too long into the light and even the eye of a Thousand Sons legionary could be blinded.

Magnus the Red was such a light.

The primarch thought well before speaking.

‘The appearance of boundaries has always had a role to play in progress. It is a reassurance to those who might otherwise feel threatened by advancement and change and seek to undermine it. How easily might a wounded and vengeful human race have laid Mars and all its lore to waste if not for the Crimson Accords and the destruction of the silica animus? The Emperor, too, has restricted many of the technologies that once threatened to bring humanity low.’ His expression darkened and the chamber, albeit briefly, appeared to do the same. ‘Horus and the Lion together petitioned Him to outlaw many of the psychic technologies that I shared with my brothers’ Legions.’ His expression again became sanguine, and Hakoris almost doubted whether he had seen the change at all. ‘It is possible to hold a pure view on the value of knowledge, while also acknowledging where humanity in its infinite complexity remains unready for it.’ He shrugged slightly. ‘How else are we, in this fragile, fumbling age, to account for the collapse of our species from its zenith? An Age of Technology as we, even

here, can but dimly envisage.’

‘But we are the Thousand Sons,’ said Hakoris. ‘To succumb to fear and ignorance, that is to fall into the trap laid for us by others. To perceive ourselves as they do.’

Magnus smiled.

Hakoris’ face could do nothing but mirror it.

Was it even possible, he wondered, for a Legiones Astartes warrior to defy the temperament of his own primarch?

An interesting area of enquiry, had he not obsessions enough of his own.

‘It is not their fault,’ said Magnus, after a moment. ‘They will come to our way of thinking in time. They derive from the same maker as do we, and strive for the same being’s goals.’

‘With respect, lord, you are not Mortarion. You are not Horus, or El’Jonson. You are Magnus the Red, Crimson King of Prospero, patron of scholars and seeker of knowledge. I do not believe you would seek to prevent my explorations of the Great Ocean.’

‘I would. If I decide that I must.’

‘But why?’ The question burst from his breast. ‘No question is more profound, or promises to answer so much.’

Again, Magnus appeared to think deeply before answering. Something unnerving passed the myriad flux of his facial expressions.

‘I am here to judge *your* studies and its dangers, Aqhet. Do not think to question me.’

Hakoris’ gaze fell away, unable to bear his primarch’s anger.

‘No, lord.’

‘Look at me.’

Hakoris forced his face to turn upwards.

Magnus’ single golden eye drank him in: it was impossible to look into that liquid orb and speak anything but truth.

‘What have you found, Aqhet, to conclude that the Aquilae is more than just a coterie of common interest, that what it represents is a sixth aspect of power overlooked until now by all before you?’

‘The Raptora, the Corvidae, the Athanaeans, the Pyrae, the Pavoni – they are collectives of like minds and similar powers, each reflections of the Great Ocean. The Aquilae has ventured further from the comfort of the shallows, and I contend that there is a power fundamentally of its own nature to be found in the deeper places of the empyreal sea.’

‘Go on,’ said Magnus.

‘It is not another aspect of power such as the five Cults represent. I believe it to be the basis of all power.’

‘So,’ said Magnus, his voice drawing itself out. ‘It is superior.’

Hakoris shook his head. ‘No, lord. I did not mean–’

‘The moon may illuminate the night, but take away the sun and it loses its power.’

‘Are you familiar with the Terran parable of the blind men and the elephant?’

Magnus smiled.

‘I would hear you tell it anyway.’

Hakoris frowned, looking inward for a moment to set himself, and then nodded. ‘A group of blind men learn of a creature, an elephant, in their village, which none of the men have encountered before. Although the men cannot see they decide they must visit this fantastical creature, and that by touch alone they might explore it. The elephant was, supposedly, a vast creature, and each man could feel but a single part of the whole. One man felt its long proboscis and described the elephant as being a long and muscular serpent. Another groped a leg and declared it to be akin to a tree. A third man pushed against its hide and argued that, no, it was clearly as tall and strong as the wall of a house. Other men explored its tail, its ear, and its tusk, and none could agree on the single nature of the elephant, or realise that, but for the want of another way of seeing, all of their interpretations were true.’

‘Variants of the tale can be found throughout the old cultures of the Asiatic plate,’ said Magnus. ‘In many of them, it is interpreted as a cautionary tale against the perils of dogma, a parable of the subjectivity of knowledge. In others, however, it evolved instead to become a chastisement of the “blind” for their failure to recognise the great work of a visionary.’ He smiled at Hakoris, but it was without warmth or reassurance. The eye held him like a hand against a wall.

Arguing philosophy with Magnus the Red was like wrestling with fire.

‘Are you the visionary or the fool, Aqhet?’

‘I–’

‘No, please continue,’ he said. ‘You have wielded your metaphor well, now show us your argument’s point.’

Hakoris’ torso half-turned, his eyes not quite able to break the primarch’s

hold, and gestured towards Nepfithu. The warrior had become abstract under the Symbol of Thutmose, clearer to him than the Rehati but still faintly drawn. He remained bowed and on bent knee, entirely unmoving, the bushel of grimoires he had been carrying set reverently upon the ground before him

‘We have been diligent in recording all that we have–’

‘It will be examined,’ said Magnus, with a dismissive flick of long, clawlike nails. ‘I want to know what you know. But more. I want to know what you believe you know.’

Hakoris licked his lips: transhuman physiology was superbly optimised for fluid retention, and yet his lips were dry.

‘I have explored the Great Ocean in astral form,’ he said.

‘All who have pushed as far as the second Enumeration have seen the Ocean,’ Magnus said, his voice taking on more of a growl with every word he uttered. ‘All who do know better than to fly too far, or to gaze too deeply. The Emperor Himself drew this promise from me in the Halls of Leng.’

‘And why?’

Hakoris felt the warning in the subtle retreat of the primarch’s emotions from his. ‘*Why?*’

‘We all have some awareness of that which dwells in the deep Ocean.’

‘Predatory emotions,’ said Magnus. ‘Strange manifestations. Perilous reflections. Are they alive? Perhaps they are, though it would stretch most definitions of *life*. Are they self-aware? I am not sure.’ He bared his teeth. ‘Yes, my son. I can acknowledge ignorance, even in myself. What is learning, but the realisation and rejection of one’s prior limits? What is wisdom but the room to doubt? These… let us call them *creatures*, lest we allow for the more colourful etymology of past generations to colour our perceptions.’ He chuckled darkly. ‘But as to the question of intelligence. They appear to our astral selves as sharks and wolves and any blending of ten thousand predacious bioforms encountered by the collective human psyche over the millennia of its evolution and expansion. Tell me why that is, Aqhet?’

‘Because the warp reflects what it is shown.’

Magnus nodded, teeth still showing. ‘It is fearful and dangerous, because that is what we are. How can a reflection of our own thoughts and powers claim self-awareness, or even true intelligence? You do not hold your

tutelary, Saponet, as an independent partner, and nor is there anything to be found in the deeper Ocean but the ancient echoes of ancestral foibles.'

'A surface can be reflective on both sides, lord.'

Magnus paused.

It was a small thing, but Hakoris noticed it, a subtle redrawing of psychic tensions, as obvious, even under the aegis of the Symbol of Thutmose, as a blush across a man's face or the facial tic that presaged violence.

'They are not like us,' Hakoris continued. 'But those entities who dwell in the very deepest reaches of the Ocean are both intelligent and aware. Though they are aware of us I believe they find us as strange and indecipherable as I do them. They are curious of me, lord, of us, and if they are capable of curiosity then does that not make them independently intelligent? Can they not, indeed, be reasoned with? Imagine what we could learn of the Great Ocean from beings who are fundamentally as one with its powers. And *that*,' he said, taking a deep breath, 'is the Aquilae.'

Magnus leant slowly forwards. His eye was glowing.

'Have you conversed with one of these intelligences, Aqhet Hakoris?'

Hakoris broke eye contact with an effort.

It was impossible to look into that eye and speak anything but truth.

'No.'

For a long time, Magnus said nothing.

His aura faded into contemplation, diminishing from that of a supreme being to an aspect more comparable to that of a Grekan titan, the son of the primordial deities of Earth and Heaven. His presence descended from the astral, becoming merely a superhuman giant of red skin and golden armour. The retreat of his halo permitted Hakoris a glimpse of his jurors, the Magisters Templi in the higher benches, but they remained patiently observant, each confined to their own minds. In light of proceedings Hakoris was uncertain why Magnus had convened them. They would ultimately obey the primarch's judgement and his was the only mind of consequence.

Not the Emperor's.

Not Horus'.

Only Magnus ruled the XV Legion.

'I thought that you of all people would approve,' said Hakoris, softly. 'You were the one who saved the Thousand Sons. Surely you could see the value of this work.'

‘I could ask why this subject was so dear to you, but I know why.’

The primarch sighed.

Hakoris could feel the argument escaping him, and he did not know why. His ignorance irritated him more than his failure of persuasion. Doubt and uncertainty troubled him like a rash.

Why was Magnus so predisposed against his work?

An uncomfortable theory began to formulate in his mind.

*The primarch knows*.

With Magnus occupied in contemplation, Hakoris found himself able to turn his head.

Khaleif, Nepfithu and Djet wore vaguely outlined expressions of bewilderment and horror. He caught Nepfithu’s eye. A resolve passed between them, one conveyed through understanding and innuendo for no true communion could occur through the Symbol of Thutmose or evade Magnus’ notice, and the legionary’s outline appeared to firm as it did so.

It was becoming obvious that Magnus the Red knew something he was not prepared to admit. Something that would make him question Hakoris’ enquiries, or fear their purpose.

But Hakoris knew things too.

If he could not convince the primarch of his verity then he would need to *show* him.

‘My lord,’ said Hakoris, simultaneously turning back to the primarch and averting his gaze. ‘I have been caught unprepared, and am less coherent than I would wish to be. If the outcome of this symposium is to determine the fate of the Aquilae then please, permit me a short recess to gather my thoughts before you come to your judgement.’

Magnus frowned, nodded once.

‘Granted.’

*Beyond the shoals of carnivorous thought and predatory dreams, the seeker of knowledge found a thing he had not expected – calm. An endless expanse of flat, colourless aether extended out from him in all directions towards eternity’s end. He had braved the hunger and tumult of the Ocean, rejected its false promises, and he had found… nothing. The sputtering fires of determination became the ash of dejection. His body of light flickered, like a candle glimpsed from across light years of fog as he cried out in despair.*

*And the Ocean rippled.*

‘You lied,’ said Khaleif, as soon as they were alone.

‘Yes,’ said Hakoris.

‘You lied to *Magnus the Red*.’

‘I know.’

‘Why would you not tell him that we had conversed with the Dweller in the Abyss? It proves our every argument.’

‘I… I don’t know. When the moment came I felt that the truth was not what he wanted to hear.’

‘By all that’s written. We are Thousand Sons!’

Hakoris raised his hand, and Khaleif fell quiet.

It was not a gesture of authority, but of absolute mental and physical exhaustion. He had arisen from his meditations expecting the vigour and challenge of debate, yes, the exorcism of counterargument and, through it, the validation of understanding. He had been sure of it, so certain that he had planned for no other outcome. He had prepared his arguments, but not to these questions, posed with the aggression that they had been, and not from *this* inquisitor. All he wanted now was to retreat to his sanctum and meditate in solitude on how he had gone so far astray.

He slumped into a chair.

There was only one chair in the contemplation chamber and no one challenged his right to it. Nepfithu leant against a wall. Djet made do with the floor, finding space and comfort on bare stone as only the very young are capable of. Khaleif remained standing. In what little space there was available to him, he paced.

The chamber was small and sparsely furnished, lit by the single candle that Hakoris brought with them, set now on the small wooden table. Every aspect of its architecture was overt in the intention to shun stimuli and promote reflection.

Walls of undressed sandstone wobbled, unreal in the candlelight.

Hakoris leant forwards until his elbows rested on the table, head in his hands. The outer ambit of the Symbol of Thutmose veiled the pyramid’s outer chambers only thinly, but it remained a pounding ache in his brain. He breathed out.

‘Magnus had already decided against us. I do not know why. I do not know why and it… and my ignorance disturbs me. No argument can be won without full possession of the facts.’

‘Then why?’ said Nepfithu. His collection of books and scrolls were now

spread across the table. Hakoris tried to read one, but found its hieroglyphs blurred. He massaged his eyes as Nepfithu went on. ‘Why undergo this sham of a forum at all?’

‘For appearances’ sake,’ said Hakoris.

Khaleif grunted. ‘Not everyone is as dumb to the humours of their brothers as you are. Believe me, if you sense this from the primarch then Amon and the Magisters Templi will have noted it as well.’

‘Then why?’ Nepfithu repeated.

‘He hopes to be persuaded,’ said Khaleif.

‘Then we will persuade him, brothers,’ said Hakoris. ‘And we will not do it with words.’

Khaleif stopped pacing.

Hakoris’ expression communicated his intent and before such a look a mortal human might have recoiled, but a Space Marine was psychologically constructed to know no doubt.

‘We have never gone that deep before,’ said Khaleif.

‘Because we decided not to,’ said Nepfithu.

‘Out of precaution,’ Khaleif agreed. ‘We have only observed from afar. Allowed the Dweller to come to us. We have never called.’

‘It can be done,’ said Hakoris.

With unfocused eyes he gazed through the candle flicker to the uncertain stone beyond. There had been a time, not so long ago to have been dimmed by mythology, when he had been consigned to a brotherhood that dreamed only of the deepest waters. A different warrior. A foreign time. To reflect upon it now was to attempt to recall having once been a proto-hominid ape, a cynodont scurrying under the notice of god-reptiles, or a flatworm swimming in a primeval ocean. And yet, in spite of the depth and grandiose scope of the Emperor’s reworking of his genetic makeup, a part of him had once been these things. He could not *remember* in the explicit, declarative sense, but he could *feel* it.

He did not understand it, but he was close to something of grave consequence to his Legion. So very close.

‘I can call it to me,’ he said.

‘You think you can persuade Magnus by openly defying him?’ said Khaleif.

‘He will be angered, but his own senses will confirm to him that we are right.’

‘No,’ said Khaleif, backing away and making a cutting *out* gesture with his hands. ‘I will have no part in this. This has become your obsession, brother, and I have let it beguile me for too long.’

‘It is not his alone,’ said Nepfithu.

Khaleif folded his arms over his huge chest. The air between the two legionaries flickered with unguarded tension.

‘I will not betray your confidences,’ he said, after a moment had elapsed. ‘But nor will I participate in this dangerous ritual. Or lie to the primarch if asked to speak of it.’ He glared accusingly at Hakoris. ‘He will learn of it eventually. He is Magnus the Red. And when he does he will find in this conspiracy of yours every proof that his suspicions were justified.’

Nepfithu began to protest, but Hakoris raised a hand for peace.

‘Once we are recalled to session there will be no more secrets. I do not lie to the primarch, Khaleif. I choose my moment of revelation.’

The legionary sighed. ‘How do you even intend to work this? The Symbol of Thutmose will negate any effort of summoning you make.’

‘It will have to be broken.’

Despite his melancholia, Khaleif laughed. ‘Undo a mark of power written by Magnus the Red. Of course. Why did I not consider that?’

‘He is not omnipotent, brother.’

Something in the atmosphere changed.

Just uttering those words aloud felt like a Rubicon being crossed.

It was unsettling: how a simple, unvarnished *fact* could become poisonous.

‘His concentration will be elsewhere.’ He placed his hand flat on his chest, and then turned, his chair creaking, to indicate Djet.

The boy looked up with wide, dark eyes.

‘Me?’ said Djet.

He did not sound afraid. He sounded excited.

*Was I ever that fearless?*

Hakoris smiled inwardly. The practicus would grade philosophus before his fiftieth year, he was sure of it.

‘You would pit a boy against the primarch?’ said Khaleif.

‘A gifted boy,’ Hakoris corrected. ‘And no, I would not. I ask him only to ease the Symbol enough for me to perform the casting without his noticing.’

‘Is that all?’ said Khaleif.

‘I can do it,’ Djet said, excitedly. ‘And then what?’

Nepfithu grinned.

He looked conspiratorially around the candlelit circle of faces.

‘Then, young practicus, we summon a daemon.’

*‘I would have my answer,’ he cried, in a voice manifested by golden will and conveyed by the medium of thought.*

*The Ocean responded like water in a container when that container had been disturbed.*

*‘How far must I search? What more must I do?’*

*Ripples became eddies, eddies became currents, and currents, before one could understand it or convince oneself otherwise, became directed motions.*

*‘What more must I give?’*

*The question echoed back to him from the stirring Ocean. The seeker was learned enough to recognise the challenge for what it was, unwise enough to accept it as given.*

*‘Anything!’ he replied. ‘I would give anything for this knowledge!’*

*Thunder rolled across the Ocean.*

***‘Granted,’** it said.*

*Pain welled up from the position of his right eye, and he screamed, drawing his hand to his face, but immediately after the pain came knowledge. The slow burn of understanding. He gasped in wonder, and the Ocean responded, although not as the usual, passive mirror of his joy. He did not understand it, but past, present and future were all one place in the Great Ocean. Even in the throes of enlightenment, on some level he knew – it was a question that would plague him forevermore.*

Amon arrived as the antique water clocks in the contemplation chamber sang the hour to escort the Aquilae back to the Chamber of Possibilities. The old warrior’s expression was featureless throughout the short walk. Nothing in its entrenched features or contemplative lines sought to convey his thoughts or seek his erstwhile comrade’s forgiveness for this ambush. Hakoris had considered the Magister of the Ninth to be one of his few friends. He reminded himself sourly that Magistus Amon had bound his star to that of Magnus the Red a long time ago.

He crossed to his place in the enneagram.

Amon retook his seat.

The Magisters Templi looked exactly as they had when Hakoris had left them. Had they not announced themselves on his earlier arrival, then he

might have assumed them to be mannequins in crimson-and-gold ceramite.

Khaleif, Nepfithu and Djet hung back as Hakoris took his place before Magnus the Red. He bowed and buried all thought of them, pushing his thoughts into the sixth Enumeration, where even a Domnius Liminus of the Athanaeans would struggle to touch them.

Magnus stirred, light shooting from the edges and planes of his armour like stellar glares as he leant forwards in his seat.

‘You have had your recess, Aqhet,’ he said. Where before his tone had been accusatory, now it sought conciliation. Hakoris felt his convictions wane under the warmth of his father’s words. ‘I owed you that. You are right to feel as though you have been ambushed. I desired an honest appraisal of you, rather than a prepared one, but…’ He lowered his regal head, the light from numerous braziers scattering from the gold and jewelled encrustations of his crown. ‘I apologise nonetheless. We all strive for the means to better the human race. It is the reason we exist, Aqhet. And yes, there is a reason. He conveyed it to me before my physical body had even been formed, before my mind was torn from His presence. The Legiones Astartes will win His war, but only we can secure His peace. Only through the Thousand Sons can mankind realise His dreamed-of utopia.’ He sat back. Lights winked across him, becoming muted, the chamber’s atmosphere itself becoming sombre in some sympathetic act of psychic resonance. ‘But how easily does duty become obsession? A spirit of enquiry can become corrupted by ambition. A desire to succeed, however well intentioned at its outset, can override rationality, even probity.’

For too long, Hakoris was speechless.

The primarch did not simply doubt his work. He attacked his honour.

Was there a worse injury that could be done upon a brother of the Thousand Sons than to assault his intellectual integrity? Hakoris pondered it only because he could not think of a single instance of it ever being done before.

He looked up to the Magisters Templi, but to a man they seemed unmoved by this affront.

‘It is not my intention to accuse you of falsity,’ said Magnus. ‘But I know how desperate you have always been for these answers. And you have already lied to me once.’

Hakoris gawped.

‘You have conversed with the entities of the Great Ocean.’

‘My lord–’

‘Do not insult me with further denial.’

The primarch raised a finger and pointed at Djet.

The boy promptly vanished.

Hakoris stumbled out of the enneagram, stunned.

‘It is remarkable what you endured.’ Magnus rose from his seat. His voice was a vibration, infiltrating every particle of every barrier, resonating with every spark of psyche. He walked towards Hakoris. And the Rehati did nothing. They watched like painted backdrops in a Prosperine tragedy. ‘I esteem you for it. And I indulged your studies because of it, believing it important for your mind to heal, imagining, perhaps, that you would not be able to discover that which I already had.’

Hakoris pushed his mind into a higher Enumeration, the eighth, the most warlike of the mental postures, walling off his mind entirely from doubt.

But a primarch roused to anger took a mind far beyond doubt.

‘What have you done with my practicus?’

‘You were a fool to involve him.’

‘Nepfithu, Khaleif.’ The two legionaries were still kneeling. ‘Get out of here.’

‘They will not heed you now.’

Hakoris looked again to the Magisters Templi, realisation landing like a bolt from extreme range. ‘This is no trial,’ he whispered. ‘Ahriman, at least, would speak before allowing you to overstep this far.’ He turned to glare at Magnus.

The primarch laughed, and in a glitter of the aetheric he swept at Hakoris.

To see the primarch at repose was a singularly terrible thing. It was to expose one’s self-image and ambition to their true status within the cosmic order. It was to taste true power in the body of another. To see him unleashed was terror of an altogether different order. Hakoris suddenly felt pity for those that the Crimson King of Prospero had bestirred himself to ‘save’.

The legionary grasped for the Ninth and final order of Enumerations, but the primarch was too fast, almost simultaneously not there and *there*.

Magnus’ hand closed around Hakoris’ throat, and lifted him from the ground the way a man might lift a thing he wished to look beneath. Hakoris was unarmoured, but power armour would have made no difference. Every mental defence he had constructed about himself crumbled before the

primarch’s presence.

‘You know your Terran parables,’ said Magnus. ‘And that is good. You have been warned, *Icarus*, fly too near to the sun and your wings will be burned.’

Hakoris struggled against the primarch’s power, but Magnus’ supremacy was total.

His eyes rolled in their sockets.

The Chamber of Possibilities was no longer there. An ocean of transdimensional flame had displaced it, a Catheric realm of perpetual torments, twisted ambitions and the laughter of cruel gods.

He made a choking sound.

His pupils widened, as though every light in the cosmos had failed him.

‘I lied to the Emperor,’ said Magnus. ‘I lied to my Legion. But only once. To save us all. Here is your truth, Aqhet, your panacea of enlightenment.’ Creatures formed entirely of eyes, teeth and scales, swam from the maelstrom of the inchoate, drawn by the psychic beacon that was Magnus the Red. ‘Here, in my desperation, is where I sought the power to save my Thousand Sons. And where I found it. Ahriman does not know this. Amon does not. Ask yourself why I have decided that this must be so.’

‘I spoke to a warp alien,’ Hakoris choked, brought to tears by his admission. ‘It called itself… Choronzon.’

Magnus squeezed Hakoris’ throat tight. It was only by a miracle, or by forbearance, that he did not snap the legionary’s neck.

‘Then for the good of the Legion you will do as I once did,’ said Magnus. ‘You will lie.’

A sudden jolt pushed Hakoris from his mind and he blinked, clearing the glare of ivory decals and gold plating from his eyes and seeing the chamber for what felt to him like the first time. The Magisters Templi regarded him curiously from the high tiers. The thinkers, remembrancers, lorekeepers, minute-takers and scribes of the XV Legion were slowly filling up the empty seats.

Magnus the Red sat in a posture of infinite repose, reclined back, idly rotating his staff with the claw-tips of one hand. A faint smile played about his lips.

Hakoris touched his neck.

No claw marks. No crushed windpipe.

He looked down.

His feet were firmly on the ground, no evidence they had left it.

Amon leant towards him.

His expression betrayed genuine concern for a brother.

‘Aqhet?’

Hakoris looked to the ground where Magnus had drawn his Symbol of Thutmose in lines made of aether. He deployed his transhuman powers of recall to retracing the strokes the primarch had used in its formation and…

And it was not the Symbol of Thutmose at all.

Magnus had named it as such and, as every scholar of the aether knew, to name a thing was to give it power. The rune his mind recalled now was similar in formation, but different in its points of emphasis.

Its purpose had not been to keep outside minds from probing this chamber.

It had been to keep *his* mind from the chamber.

He looked up, aghast, to see Djet, with Khaleif and Nepfithu, still kneeling and with heads bowed.

If they had appeared flavourless and shallow before it was because Hakoris himself saw them that way. The entire inquisition had taken place in Hakoris’ mind. Magnus had drawn a circle of Prospero’s greatest psykers as witnesses and they had not even noticed.

‘That which is spoken within these walls will be open to public record,’ said Magnus, speaking with the slight drawl of supreme power.

The primarch’s hand dropped to the colossal tome of arcane lore, the *Book of Magnus*, that hung from his belt by a chain beside his sword. He tapped the metal binding with a long, tapering nail.

Hakoris’ hand slid from his throat.

Magnus smiled.

‘I, for one, am eager to learn what you have discovered.’

*Sergeant Aqhet Hakoris, warrior of the fire deserts of Oaus and a legionary of the Thousand Sons, awoke aboard the* Photep. *Medicae equipment blinked and chirped, but in futility, for they had played no role in his awakening. A primarch greeted his return, a demigod whom he had never before encountered except in astral vision, and yet the first thing he looked to was his own hands.*

*Magnus smiled, the indulgent smile of a proud father watching their child for the first time employ a Palmar grasp on a coloured pencil.*

*‘My hands,’ said Hakoris. ‘They are my own.’*

*‘Yes,’ said Magnus. ‘You have been cured of the Flesh Change.’*

*The warrior lowered his hands, and for the first time looked in awe upon his sire and saviour.*

*‘How?’*

*There were many questions he might have asked, but he was a brother of the Thousand Sons – this was the only one that mattered.*

*‘Rest now, my son.’*

*‘I must know how,’ said Hakoris. ‘Tell me.’*

*Magnus rose without answering. He had defied his father in order to pass His test and seek His answers, but he was Magnus the Red of Prospero, and he knew his limits.*

*His own sons he expected to be more obedient.*

The planet was Gorrobin, the machinery of crusade was in full motion, and the hour was midnight. Regardless of relativistic or sidereal time or the fluctuations of the Great Ocean, separate even from the actuality of a diurnal cycle, the powers of the Aquilae always waxed most strongly with the onset of midnight.

Hakoris ignited a candle with his mind.

Light flared from nothing, illuminating a pale face, drawn paler by long years of obsession. The bare stone of the old rockcrete pillbox shuddered under distant waves of shelling. Dust sheeted from the ceiling, the candle flame appearing to jink and writhe like a living thing to avoid being doused.

He sat cross-legged within the concentric rings of circles, nonogons, and eightfold stars that he had hand-sketched into the dirt floor. Runes and sigils, years of study represented by unsubtle slash marks in chalk, wax and, where conventional materials eluded him, blood, adorned the walls.

He stared into the flame, working his mind slowly through the Enumerations.

His testimony before the Magisters Templi in the Pyramid of Theret had damned him. He was a leper to the Legion now. His name was poison. The Aquilae had been broken, its membership scattered to new Fellowships across a dozen warzones, and scattered again over the years since. Khaleif, Nepfithu and the others actively cursed his memory. Hakoris still felt the ripples of hatred in the Great Ocean when they did so. Magnus had seized his books. He did not know what had become of them. He had been demoted to line brother, assigned to a small taskforce operating under the

command of a sergeant with a psychic mastery seven tiers below his own and a hundred and fifty years his junior. They had been attached to the command chain of the 4011th, of the VIII Legion, tasked with a string of low-level Compliance actions across the crusade front of the Abrint Sector.

It had been nine years.

He had not complained.

Somewhere, no more than a kilometre away, someone screamed.

The candle flickered.

There was freedom in exile. Gorrobin was a long way from the Vitruvian pyramids and Cult temples of Tizca, and from the eye of Magnus the Red. The truth could be ignored, it could be willed into a form of collective fugue if the desire to do so was widespread and powerful enough, but it could not be denied forever.

It had a way of making itself known.

The Great Ocean wanted to be understood. Mankind deserved that knowledge.

He raised his hands to the candle flame.

'*Choronzon*,' he muttered.

The flame bent towards him, and flickered.

He smiled.

His father was wrong. He was right. And he was going to prove it.

*OceanofPDF.com*

# COUNCIL OF TRUTH

Mike Brooks

*OceanofPDF.com*

In the cold dark of space, the faint light of distant stars glints off the scarred and pitted hulls of mighty vessels. An expeditionary fleet of Terra, the primal might of humanity’s cradle given form, hangs in the void. Within the metal cocoons of precious atmosphere that has been wrenched by techno-sorcery from the bare elements of the cosmos, scurry innumerable humans of the Imperial Fleet and the Imperial Army: remembrancers and thralls, tech-priests of Mars and, greatest of all, the gene-enhanced warriors of the Legiones Astartes.

But this is unlike most expeditionary fleets. While its kin might proudly boast their nature and heritage with towering sigils emblazoned on the flanks of their ships, endless broadcasts of vox and machine-code declaring the glory of Terra and its Emperor, or even vast void-banners, this fleet runs dark, and near-silent. Only the faintest markings denote a difference between craft, and even these conform to no system recognisable to outsiders. For those who have some awareness, however, this very lack of identification provides a clue as to the nature of the force, for only the XX Legion, the Alpha Legion, traverse the galaxy so anonymously.

One thing that cannot be hidden is the size of a vessel, although even that may not be a true witness to its capabilities. Nonetheless, the ship currently

known as the *Alpha* is a first amongst equals here: a mighty Gloriana-class battleship that functions, at least sometimes, as the flagship of the primarch Alpharius. There are certain features of a battleship that cannot easily be altered – the placement of the engines, the warp drive, the Navigator's chamber, or the bridge, for example – and yet the interior of the *Alpha* has still undergone subtle changes since it was first launched. Corridor and level designations no longer follow sequential norms, or may appear to change those designations partway through their course. Floor plans have been altered, not only from the original layout, but also in relation to the decks above and below. Here and there, bulkheads now cut corridors in half, or turbolift shafts no longer traverse the craft's full height. Should a hostile force board the ship, their surroundings will make little sense, and attempts to coordinate movements will be difficult in the extreme.

Which is, of course, the point.

There are many chambers within the ship: huge, grandly lit auditoriums and stark, functional war rooms; individual berths and dark, claustrophobic cells in which pain can be applied to captives, should such a thing become necessary for the Legion to fulfil its current task. Alpharius currently occupies none of these, but is instead within a small chamber in which a semicircle of slightly raised benches surround a single seat. The warriors of the Legiones Astartes do not need to sit, but sit they do while they are in this chamber, because sometimes unaugmented humans in service to the Alpha Legion are present, who lack such hardiness. Today, however, only three others are there, besides Alpharius, and they all wear the armour of the Emperor's finest armies.

This is the Chamber of Truth. In here, an individual may be questioned: not as precursor to punishment, but to provide clarity. In here, the interrogators' questions may not be in line with their own sentiments. In here, truth is stretched out and examined, magnified and scrutinised, so that all may leave with a greater understanding of its nature than when they entered.

The primarch of the XX Legion sits in the seat, resplendent in his crested, scaled helm. His questioners sit on the front rank of benches, and each is dressed in plate that is marked with the sigil of the Legion, but is otherwise unadorned with symbols denoting rank or identity. They appear as featureless, genderless and anonymous as any battle automata of the Legio Cybernetica, and yet each is a transhuman warrior brought forth by the

gene-sorcery of the Emperor of Mankind.

‘Tesstra has fallen,’ says the first questioner. ‘The Tesstran Conservation has entered Compliance and will now be folded into the bosom of the Imperium of Man.’

‘Indeed,’ the primarch replies, with a nod.

‘Shortly after this campaign began,’ the second questioner states, ‘Lord Guilliman of the Ultramarines publicly criticised you, in open council. He called into question your tactics, your methodology, and indeed your commitment.’

‘And many may feel that he was correct to do so,’ adds the third questioner. ‘At that point, the Ultramarines had made tangible progress in bringing Compliance to the outer reaches of the Conservation, and their ultimate victory already appeared inevitable. Our Legion had been raiding to little appreciable effect.’

‘Lord Guilliman demanded that you should follow his methodology of warfare,’ the second questioner continues. ‘He further demanded that you should cede control of your Legion to him for the duration of the campaign, so that it might be prosecuted correctly, and total Compliance achieved within months. Why did you not do this, when he was the more experienced Imperial campaigner present in the theatre of war? Even if you decided not to cede control, why did you not adhere to his strategies, which have been proven again and again on the battlefield? Or for that matter, the strategies of any of the other Legiones Astartes?’

The primarch nods slightly, in acknowledgement of the question.

‘Roboute claimed he could bring Compliance within months. I brought it within weeks.’

‘That is an admirable justification after the event,’ the first questioner states. ‘Unless you have a gift of precognition, it does not provide an explanation for your actions at the time.’

The faintest hint of a chuckle emerges from within the primarch’s helm. ‘A fair point. I ignored Roboute’s demands because his vision of war, like the rest of my brothers’, is blinkered. They see war as a purely martial pursuit, the setting of warrior against warrior in order to establish dominance.

‘They each pursue it in a different manner, of course. Corax and the Khan seek to bleed the enemy through a thousand cuts. Rogal wishes them to break themselves on his strength, Perturabo breaks theirs instead. Angron overwhelms with utter force and ferocity, Russ does the same, albeit with a

tighter focus. Roboute, the Lion, Horus – they all use their gifts, and their gifts are tremendous, to bring the enemy to battle where they wish, and then outmanoeuvre them mentally as well as physically in order to bring victory.'

'And they achieve this,' the third questioner states. 'The Imperium continues to expand, bringing its light to humanity and eradicating the xenos threats it encounters, and your brothers have been the spearheads of that expansion.'

'It does, and they have,' the primarch agrees. 'Truly, my brothers are to be admired for how they and their Legions have overcome their enemies on the field of battle. And yet still, they are blinkered.

'For all their gifts, subterfuge is rarely amongst them. Roboute would never consider that by announcing himself, he gives his enemies a weapon. He lays down his tactics, disseminates them, trumpets them for all to hear. Do not mistake me – even knowing his methodology, an enemy would still be hard-pressed to best him, but with every battle he fights and every victory he achieves, his pattern grows clearer. Any army commanded by Roboute can be predicted. It may still emerge triumphant, but it is predictable. In the same manner, any enemy can know that the World Eaters will attempt to break them with brute force. That knowledge may not be enough to allow them to resist, but they know what form the assault will take.'

The primarch spreads his hands.

'An enemy's capacity to resist is sorely limited if they do not know who they are fighting, or where their opponents are. They are even less capable of resistance if they do not yet know that they are fighting at all.'

*The walls were hot, and the strong summer wind whipped up the dust and flung it at the city. Prime, the capital of Tesstra and the beating heart of the Tesstran Conservation, squatted under the sun like an amphibian caught too far from the refreshing embrace of water. The seasonal rains would come soon, as the continent's heated land mass sucked in moisture-laden air from the ocean, but for now the earth was cracking, the plants were yellow and wilting, and the sun glared off every window and piece of exposed metalwork as though it sought to nail unwary eyeballs to the back of the skull in which they rode.*

*It was no weather in which to be on the walls in full battle-kit, but Birth-*

*Trooper Ussuril had no choice in the matter. The Conservation's strict eugeno-caste system meant his role had been decided even before he had been conceived: he came from trooper stock, and so trooper stock was what he was. In days past, being a birth-trooper had not actually been such a bad role, for depredations on the Conservation by hostile xenos species were reasonably rare, and significant social unrest was infrequent. You drilled and you paraded, you slept in the barracks and ate in the mess, and if you exhibited no abnormalities you would be allowed to breed. It was a simple life, and if Ussuril ever cast longing glances at the high spires and shining towers of those born to greater things, he needed only to see the malnourished wrecks of those born into the lowest stations to remind himself that he had not been dealt a bad hand.*

*That had changed when the so-called Imperium had arrived.*

*Word had filtered through from the outer planets, word of a new alliance of humanity that had also survived the centuries of darkness, and which had now found its way to the Conservation. However, they were a warlike, barbaric people, and when the Conservation had refused to submit, they had attacked. Official reports had been few in number since war had been officially announced, but rumours had a way of percolating through the military. A picture was coming into focus: that of an implacable, measured advance by the Imperium, methodically consuming the Conservation from the outside in.*

*And then everything had changed again.*

*Lightning raids on Tesstra itself, far beyond the active battle zones, had brought the planet, and especially its capital, onto high alert. Priority targets hadn't been hit – they were far too well defended, and the Imperials too craven – but the simple fact of the attacks was worrying enough: how had the Imperium managed to penetrate this far into the Conservation? And how did this new, ghostly, hit-and-run strategy match with the workmanlike campaign in the outer reaches?*

*And then the raids had stopped.*

*'It's the waiting that gets you,' Baras said from beside him. They were from the same birth-unit, their conception timed along with dozens of others so they would all be birthed at the same time, be raised and developed at the same rate, and know each other from their earliest understandings. Such links forged a comradeship that, according to the gene-smiths, could not be bettered by any other fighting force in the galaxy.*

*‘It’s the guns that get you,’ Hassar disagreed, from Ussuril’s other side. He was chewing burril leaf, and it was staining his teeth purple. ‘I’ll take my chances with the waiting.’*

*‘It’s the sun that gets me,’ Ussuril admitted. He was sweating in his combat rig, even though the star was dipping towards the horizon.*

*‘Not long now for you, then,’ Hassar said, nodding towards the impending sunset. ‘Baras will be doomed to wait another day, though.’*

*‘A week with nothing?’ Baras replied. ‘No major attack? Not even any further raids? The Imperium’s reavers* were *here, so where did they go? How does that not worry you?’*

*‘If I was meant to worry about such things, I’d have been born a general,’ Hassar drawled, spitting a wad of purplish saliva over the rampart of the five hundred metre-high wall. ‘We stand on the wall and shoot anything that’s not meant to come near us. What more do you want?’*

*Ussuril knew Hassar was lying. He’d known the man since they were infants, after all. Hassar professed indifference, but he was on edge: he only chewed burril when he wanted to calm his nerves. In truth, Ussuril was on edge too. He hated baking in his combat rig when the sun’s rays fell on him, but he hated the feeling it gave him of being exposed under the sky even more, as though he were lit up for an enemy whom he couldn’t see, didn’t know and didn’t understand. There was a pressure in his head that usually meant a storm was coming, but the seasonal rains weren’t due yet. He desperately wanted something to shoot at: something he could see, that he could fight.*

*The sun gradually dipped below the horizon, and the temperature dropped from uncomfortable down into something more tolerable. Dusk stretched across the sky from the far horizon, chasing the sun as it fled from this face of the planet, and the lights of Tesstra Prime blinked on to banish the darkness. Ussuril should have felt more comfortable, yet despite the fact he was no longer sweating, his guts were tying tighter and tighter. He felt he could see right up into the void above; and, importantly, that something up there could see* down, *directly onto him.*

*‘So when do–’ Baras began.*

*She never finished her sentence, for it was lost in a series of hollow booms from behind them.*

*As one, Ussuril’s garrison rushed to the rear edge of the ramparts. In front of them lay the yawning abyss of the Kavenan Gulf, the half-kilometre-wide*

*trench dug centuries ago to further foil any adversary that made it over or through the wall, and layered with mines and other, more esoteric traps. The Seventh Bridge, the bridge that spanned the gulf and connected their barracks to the main body of the city, was smoking at either end of its great span.*

*Then, as Ussuril watched with horrified eyes, the great causeway dropped into the gulf. Detonations flashed up as its impact set off the ancient traps that had lain beneath it.*

*'Sabotage!' Hassar yelled, pointing at the smoke clouds – the telltale remnants of explosive charges. 'Sarge, sabotage! The bridge is down!'*

*'We're cut off!' Baras shouted, running back to the wall's exterior and unslinging her carbine as though expecting attackers to come boiling over the top at any moment. 'They're coming! They're coming here!'*

*'Seventh Squad, back to the wall!' bawled Birth-Sergeant Herfa, and Seventh obeyed him mechanically, their indoctrinated obedience overriding even their fear and alarm. 'The rest of you…' the sergeant added, then trailed off and licked his lips nervously. Ussuril stared at him. His officer wasn't certain what to do. How could an officer not know what to do?*

*More explosions flared in the darkness, accompanied by more cracks and booms, disconnected from the lights that birthed them by the distance the sound waves had to travel. Secondary explosions flashed, and their discharges rang out as well, as other bridges began to fall and also triggered the mines in the depths.*

*'Third… Fifth… Eighth…' Ussuril muttered, his eyes tracking the locations and linking them to where he knew those structures to be.*

*'By all the gods,' Hassar breathed. 'They're coming* everywhere.*'*

*'No,' Ussuril said, feeling cold fear grip his stomach. Fear, and the beginnings of despair. 'They're not coming anywhere.'*

*He pointed towards the glittering bulk of Tesstra Prime, the city from which they were now isolated, barring a long trek around the wall in search of a bridge that had not been destroyed. Whole chunks of the city were winking out and going dark. Power failures were not unheard of, of course, but at this exact moment?*

*'They're already here.'*

'Your tactics to take Tesstra Prime were elaborate, to say the least,' states the third questioner.

‘Over-elaborate, in the opinion of Lord Guilliman,’ the first adds.

‘And yet we have already seen that they were effective,’ the primarch of the XX Legion points out.

‘Their effectiveness is not what we are questioning,’ the third questioner says, ‘merely their efficiency. The Legiones Astartes are the mightiest force under arms in the galaxy. Why resort to such an elaborate method of attack, with many interlinking parts that must all function as planned in order to achieve their goals? Surely your Legion could have taken the city in a far more direct manner, one which had more capacity for redundancy and options for adaption should the defence prove sterner than anticipated, or if there were other unforeseen factors such as those relating to inaccurate intelligence?’

‘It could have been done,’ the primarch agrees. ‘I could use my Legion as my brothers do, and rely on their abilities as supreme warriors to carry the day. Roboute’s meandering in the outer reaches of the Conservation demonstrated that. But that is my brother’s weakness – he prides himself as an expert tactician, but how much of that is based on the tools with which he works? A legionary is amongst the finest warriors in the galaxy–’

‘Amongst?’ the first questioner interjects.

‘Amongst,’ the primarch says, and there is the hint of a smile in his voice, although his face cannot be seen. ‘My father’s Custodes are, individually, the equal of almost any legionary and the superior of most.’

‘The Legio Custodes do not fight as one,’ the third questioner states. ‘They lack the mindset for it.’

‘Mindsets can change,’ the primarch points out. ‘The processes that give these warriors their abilities cannot. Or so we have been told,’ he adds, with a glance at the first questioner. ‘My point is that it is easy for Roboute to proclaim himself a mighty general when his troops obey his orders quickly, without question, and are singularly capable in all aspects of open warfare. He thinks that off the back of this fact, he can forge a legacy that will endure – that he can set down a method which any commander can follow and achieve the same results as he has. *But he has not been tested against a superior adversary.’*

The primarch sighs, as if regretful.

‘One day, Roboute may face an enemy that will not engage him in the manner of warfare that he knows. His Ultramarines, the pale imitations of him that they are, may find themselves without his guidance, or find that

what guidance he has left them is insufficient for the task. What will they do then, when the dogma they clasp so close to their hearts has failed them? When the commands do not come, or, perhaps more worryingly, their commander cannot be trusted? Will their spirit break? Perhaps, and perhaps not, but will they *adapt*? Of that, I am more doubtful. They will need to learn new warfare from first principles, and while they attempt that, they will be cut to ribbons.'

The primarch leans forward slightly, and the eye-lenses of his helm appear to focus on the third questioner.

'My Legion will not be caught thusly. My Legion is already proficient in any number of ways of making war, both overt and covert, and we maintain this proficiency by using all these tools as often as we may. We are not a swordsman who has mastered a single thrust. We hold mastery over many strokes, all of us do, so that the enemy will not know which is the killing blow.'

*The blaring alarms woke Birth-General Juran Kodavron from sleep, and she rolled out of bed with attention-enhancing stimulants already coursing through her system. She grimaced and spat, ridding herself of the excess saliva that the initial dump always generated, and made a grab for her uniform. She'd made sure there was always one within arm's reach for when she woke, ever since the Imperium had begun its aggression in the outer planets. Her face was well known, but there could still be a split-second delay in someone obeying her orders without the direct visual cue of her rank colours, and even a split-second delay could be crucial further down the command line.*

*'Tactical!' she called, as she hauled her dress shirt on. Her left eye, replaced shortly after birth with a command prosthetic that had been enlarged and updated as she'd grown, immediately flashed up an overlay on her view of the room, a nebulous web of light depicting the geographical parameters of identified enemy action thus far. Her heart sank when she recognised the outline of the entire city. The full assault they'd been expecting, which they'd prepared for, which they'd garrisoned and fortified their walls against, had arrived with no explanation for the delay between the first raiding strikes and this offensive. There had been no communication, no threats, no demands for surrender with the raids used as examples of what would happen if that surrender was not given. War had*

*simply arrived, unannounced by anything except its own first tendrils.*

*What was more, she realised a moment later, the flashing icons signifying confirmed or suspected enemy activity were all inside the walls, and yet the walls themselves were untouched. There had been no frontal assault, no strike of overwhelming force that had pierced the first line of their defences. The troops there were still at full strength.*

*The enemy was within the city, as though the walls had presented them with no obstacle whatsoever.*

*Kodavron suppressed the shiver that ran through her at that realisation, and forced herself to think clearly. She was one of the finest military minds in the entire Conservation, descended from generations of commanders, and she would not be undone by even such an adverse situation as this. This was her home, by all the gods, and the Imperium's savages would not desecrate it in such a manner without feeling her wrath.*

*'Give me all confirmed instances of enemy activity,' she ordered, and the majority of the icons winked out, leaving a mere handful. These, then, were the locations where hostiles had been sighted, not just where damage had been caused. 'Evidence,' she commanded, strapping on her gun belt.*

*Pict-feeds began playing in her vision, footage from security surveillance devices, each linked to a location. She simultaneously heard, through the aural implant in her right ear, the panicked distress messages that had been broadcast by power grid engineers, by medical personnel, by the staff of communications relay stations.*

*Words and pictures married up to paint a grim, although not unexpected picture: the heavily armoured, transhuman shock troops of the Imperium. The Conservation practised gene-smithing, of course, to better engineer its citizens for their roles in life, but even their enhanced ogryns, their best infantry, lacked the sheer amount of alterations that appeared to have been made to the Imperium's reavers. Few had been captured, and none alive, but they were barely recognisable as human any longer. It wasn't just the size – some of the Conservation's castes matched that, such as the heavy labourers, or the Birthguard – it was the bizarre biological alterations they'd received, such as a second heart, the strange black exoskin and, if reports from the front lines were to be believed, oral venom sacs. How could the Imperium even presume to speak for humanity, when these were its emissaries? And how had they got here, these giants? How had they infiltrated the most heavily defended city in the entire Conservation?*

*In some respects, it didn't matter. They were here, and they were engaging targets, and they would be dealt with. The details of their arrival would have to be pursued at a later date.*

*'Include suspected enemy activity,' Kodavron ordered, as she headed for her chamber door, and her display updated again. There was a new icon now: another probable attack in the time since she'd last looked at the full picture. The enemy were all across the city, and were striking at targets designed to maximise confusion, but they seemed to be few in number. Kodavron would have placed money on many of the attacks being pre-planned sabotage, not outright assaults, and time-coordinated to give the impression of a much larger force working in unison.*

*The Imperium's transhumans were fearsome warriors, the Conservation had already learned that, and when deployed en masse there was little that could be done to halt their advance. Here, though, a small number deep in hostile territory…*

*They hadn't compromised the palace. She palmed open her chamber door and stepped out into the corridor, and her two towering Birthguard took up position on either side of her, their faces hidden by the mirrored helms that made them even more impersonal and menacing to would-be assassins. The enemy had struck all across the city, but they hadn't been able to penetrate the Palace of Radiance where she, the other high-ranking officers, and the birth-supremes all resided, and where the ogryn reserves were barracked.*

*Her communicator beeped, and a moment later the smoothly modulated voice of Supreme Do'Hetta spoke into her ear.*

'Juran, what in the name of the gods is happening?'

*It was the first time Kodavron had heard one of the supremes sound even the slightest bit concerned, for all that the ability to express emotion had been practically bred out of them. They were ethereal, untouchable, immune from the petty worries and stresses of those they ruled – or at least, that was the impression they gave. Kodavron, somewhat closer to the reality of things than Prime's masses, knew full well that the supremes were in no way as permanently calm as they appeared; they just had the galaxy's best gambling faces. Normally it would have amused her to hear even the faintest tremble in a supreme's voice, but given the circumstances…*

*'We're under attack, supreme,' she replied, doing her best to sound respectful despite the fact her ruler really should have been able to work it out for himself. 'My initial analysis suggests a small group of the so-called*

*Imperium's transhuman soldiers.'*

'And what action are you taking?'

*'They've tried to isolate the wall garrisons from the rest of the city,' Kodavron said, rechecking her display. 'They've taken out most of the bridges, but not all. Perhaps those charges failed, perhaps their operatives were engaged and killed – it doesn't matter. If we pull the garrisons back and swamp the city, we can tighten a net inwards and crush them against the palace. Scramble the fighters to prevent any chance of an aerial evacuation, and we'll have them.'*

'You want to force them *closer* to us?'

*'The palace is impregnable, your highness,' Kodavron reminded him. 'They can either engage our troops in the streets, when we have overwhelming numerical superiority, or flee before them and make a last stand outside these walls. Either way, we'll have them, and we can send a message to the Imperium about what happens when they strike at our heart.'*

'I want the Birthguard doubled,' *Do'Hetta demanded.* 'Doubled on all supremes!'

*'By your will, your highness,' Kodavron said, stifling a sigh. She cut the connection, opened a new one to Birthguard command, and spoke the code words to signify enemy activity and an increased guard presence on all priority personnel. 'Blue Sky Rising.'*

'Dawn Approaches,' *came the response. Within moments, the huge forms of additional Birthguard would be on their way to every supreme and high-ranking military official within the palace.*

*Kodavron's quarters were not far from the war room, and she reached it within ninety seconds of leaving her chambers. The door hissed open at her touch, and she stepped inside with her Birthguard at her shoulders. She was greeted by a maelstrom of shouting and near-panic.*

*'General!' gasped Birth-Captain Gurran, snapping into a salute. Behind him, the room quietened somewhat, and Kodavron saw faces flicker with the beginnings of hope. General Juran Kodavron would know what to do.*

*Now she just had to live up to that trust.*

*'What are you all looking at me for?' she snapped. 'We're under attack, back to your stations! Captain, I want a full tactical display up immediately – this,' she tapped her optical prosthetic, 'can only give me so much detail. Give me your full analysis of the situation as you understand*

*it, in the next twenty seconds, starting now.'*

*Gurran saluted again, and began speaking. He was solid and dependable, and had already taken steps to secure further priority targets from attack, but he didn't have the tactical vision to bring the fight to the enemy. Kodavron stepped into the breach.*

*'The remaining bridges have been secured?' she queried.*

*'As tightly as we can, general,' Gurran responded. 'Heavy guard on them all, we're inspecting to make sure there are no hidden demolition charges that have yet to detonate.'*

*'Good,' Kodavron nodded. 'I want our troops pulled back from the walls, each garrison to use the nearest functional bridge, leaving ten per cent strength in place. They're to perform a sweep-and-clear operation throughout the entire city, closing in on the palace.'*

*'Ma'am?' Gurran blurted, surprise overcoming his training.*

*'The* entire *city, captain!' Kodavron snapped. 'I don't care how big the place is, there are enough of them to do it! I don't want a single building left unaccounted for – we are going to find these savages, and one way or another, we are going to kill them.'*

*'Yes, general,' Gurran replied. Kodavron listened to the orders being relayed through to the wall garrisons, and allowed herself a faint smile. The enemy had been aggressive, and efficient, but an element of their plan had failed. There were still some bridges left for Prime's troops to withdraw along, and then crush the saboteurs.*

*The* ping *of the war room's door drew her attention, and she looked around to see two Birthguard entering. Of course; the order to double the guard on all priority personnel included herself. Her two towering shadows turned to greet the newcomers as the door hissed shut again behind them.*

*'Blue Sky Rising,' one of the two new arrivals said.*

*'Sunset Falls,' came the reply.*

*Kodavron blinked. That wasn't the correct–*

*Gunshots. A blaze of rounds filled the air as three of the Birthguard whipped their weapons up and filled the interior of the war room with violence and death. Kodavron saw the communication relay explode in a shower of sparks and twisted metal, then officer after officer get cut down by sawing arcs of fire. The Birthguard were armed with the most devastating personal firearms possessed by the Conservation, and the human form offered no resistance to them.*

*Kodavron scrabbled for her gun, but the last Birthguard was already reaching for her, and his massive arms trapped hers to her sides in a grip of steel. She struggled against his grip, and her shock at the betrayal slowed her reactions just enough for him to reach up and rip out her personal communicator implant before she could call for aid. Kodavron screamed as it tore loose from the flesh of her ear and the bone of her skull.*

*The Birthguards' guns fell silent. Three seconds after the violence had begun, it was over. Twenty officers of the Conservation lay dead. A handful had managed to draw a sidearm, but none of them had succeeded in getting a shot away.*

*'Our thanks for your assistance, general,' a deep voice said. It was the one who had hold of her. 'You saved us the trouble of having to fake the order to withdraw from the walls.' Even through her panic and rage, Juran Kodavron picked up the hints of wrongness in the accent. It spoke her language, but not with the cadences of Tesstra.*

*'Who are you?' she demanded, although she feared she knew the answer. But how could they have infiltrated the Birthguard? From where had they gained the armoured bodygloves and mirrored helms? And yet, now she looked at them anew, she saw the slight stretching and rumpling in the material that suggested they had been tailored for subtly different frames, if equally massive ones. Were their true owners already dead?*

*The answer to her spoken question, when it came, meant nothing to her.*

*'I am Alpharius.'*

*There was a sudden, brief pain in Juran Kodavron's neck as the world spun, and then everything rapidly faded to black.*

'You were the last of your brothers to be found by the Emperor,' the first questioner says. 'By the time you were reunited with your Legion, your brother primarchs were already recognised and decorated generals, with many conquests to their names.'

'This is true,' the primarch agrees with a nod.

'Could it be,' the first questioner continues, leaning forwards in their seat, 'that your attachment to highly complex, multifaceted warfare is just an attempt to outdo your siblings? That since you are unable to match their battle records, due to the shorter time you have been with your Legion, you seek to prove yourself as their superior in the methodology you use? Is this not down to tactical doctrine, but your own ego?'

‘After all,’ adds the second questioner, ‘the Ultramarines and Lord Guilliman have achieved remarkable results in their service to the Emperor. It would be understandable if you felt intimidated by the comparison – if you wished to avoid being seen as an afterthought, the last amongst equals.’

The primarch hesitates, as though considering. Then he too leans forward, steepling the fingers of his armoured gauntlets as he rests his elbows on his knees.

‘What “remarkable results” have the Ultramarines achieved?’

‘The number of worlds they have brought into Compliance is–’

‘Is misleading.’

There is a moment’s silence.

‘The Ultramarines have achieved nothing remarkable,’ the primarch states. ‘They have achieved the same thing, in the same way, again, and again, and again. They are highly skilled at it, but they do not *test* themselves. They fulfil the role for which they were created by the Emperor, and they never strive to move beyond it. Guilliman is the same as the others – they either fail to recognise their own weaknesses, or they assume that one of the rest of us can be called upon to fill the gap.’

‘Assuming what you say is true,’ the third questioner speaks up, ‘why should your brothers not feel this way?’

‘Because it will not always be true,’ the primarch says baldly. ‘Our father created us, but quite clearly His creations are neither perfect, nor indispensable to Him. There were twenty Legions, once, and two more primarchs than those that bestride the galaxy today, clad in the panoply of war. For all that my brothers invoke memories of the myths of demigods in the minds of the mortals, for all that we are far beyond human, there have been two occasions when flawed tools were discarded. Who is to say the same thing may not happen again?’

If silence can have a flavour, the one that now fills the chamber tastes of shock.

‘When my father found me, there was no sense of the last member of a family being brought home,’ the primarch continues. ‘Not as I have heard the notion of family described by mortals. There was a sense of… satisfaction. Of completeness. Of the final piece of a puzzle being located and slotted into place. I did not spend long with my father – not long compared to some of my brothers, who were by His side for decades, and shared with Him the apparent joy of each new sibling’s recovery. However,

in my time with Him I learned what many of my brothers seem to have missed – that we are my father's tools. My brothers conquer worlds and bring them into Compliance, and they think that is all that is required of them.'

'You are saying that it is not?' the first questioner asks.

'The Great Crusade is about more than just reuniting humanity,' the primarch says. 'That is a purpose, but it is not *the* purpose. My father has created these tools, and now He tests them, and the crusade is the best arena for that test. He will test us to destruction, if He needs to – for some of us, He already has. My father's vision goes beyond the crusade. He knows what must come next, but He does not share that with us. He already knows what the Ultramarines can do – will they prove it to any greater extent by conquering another hundred worlds in the same manner? No.

'That is why we fight as we do. That is why we make the preparations we make, why we have seeded the galaxy with our agents – why we recruit as we do, and train as we do. We do not know what the future holds, and the time may come when we are all there is – when there are no Iron Warriors to break the enemy down, no Raven Guard to strike from the shadows, no Ultramarines to conduct the perfect military campaign. If that happens, we must be ready for *any* role required of us. We are the Emperor's ultimate fail-safe, and we must prove to Him that this is the case.'

'So your dislike of Lord Guilliman plays no part at all?' the first questioner asks, with a hint of mocking laughter in their voice.

'I neither resent nor hate Roboute,' the primarch replies. 'I pity him. Whether the change happens gradually or suddenly, one day he and his genius will be obsolete, and all his plans will be nothing but memories. I fear he lacks the flexibility to cope with that. I will not make that mistake. I will evolve. I will always do whatever is necessary, and so will my Legion.'

*Tesstra Prime had burned.*

*The city had been gutted by explosions. Whole garrisons of Tesstran troops had been ordered to withdraw from the walls by their superiors, only to find themselves bottlenecked in the few remaining routes and then massacred when the true attack came. The walls themselves had been breached in innumerable places by convoys of super-heavy war machines that cut through the city like a finely honed blade. Most of the command structure was dead, assassinated by their own bodyguards.*

*But Prime still fought.*

*The Imperium's reavers had not pressed home their advantage. Either overconfident or lazy, they had not rooted out all those capable of resisting them. Companies of gene-enhanced ogryns, the Conservation's only troops that had so far been able to stand up to the reavers, were now ready to launch their counterstrike. In order for the attack to have any hope of successfully freeing the city, it had to move as one and hit the enemy in complete synchronicity.*

*Birth-Captain Simmun watched the chrono tick downwards inside the armoured transport from which he would be coordinating his company.*

*'Mark!' called his adjutant, a scar-faced fellow by the name of Trav.*

*'Advance!' Simmun barked into his communicator. In front of them, the garrison doors began to rise. All across Prime, eighteen other disguised doors would be doing exactly the same thing, as Prime's last, hidden reserves issued forwards to take their city back. Each company of ogryns would be commanded by a captain, whose job it was to direct their forces against the enemy, for the immense size, bulk and hardiness of their troops was not matched by their intellect.*

*Light filtered in, and the garrison poured out. They moved fast, faster than most humans could run, and with a purpose and precision that belied their size. It was the beautiful thing about his charges, Simmun thought: give them a simple task, and they would pursue it with relentless efficiency. 'Climb that mountain', 'stand here for a day', or 'fight here until you are killed' were all instructions that their minds could cope with, and which they would latch onto and complete. 'Take back the city' was too complex; for that they needed a greater mind. Those greater minds, such as Simmun's, were protected within armoured transports, that in turn drove between the walls of gene-bulked muscle on all sides. For the enemy to get to him, they would have to go through all his troops anyway.*

*'Encountering light resistance from the left flank,' Trav reported. 'Isolated sniper fire.'*

*'Range and vector?' Simmun demanded, looking at the tactical display. Within moments, their instruments' best estimates of the snipers' locations flashed up. 'Send Fourth Squad to flush them out, and send a message to Captain Ruven, they may flee towards her.'*

*'Acknowledged,' came the reply, and a unit of twenty ogryns peeled off to go hunting.*

*Less than a minute later, the main column encountered its first true resistance.*

*'Barricade ahead,' Trav said, manipulating the controls so the transport's imagers displayed what they were capturing directly onto the tactical readout.*

*'Defended?' Simmun demanded.*

*Flashes of light appeared on the image: muzzle flare.*

*'Defended,' Trav replied with a faint grin, which then disappeared as he frowned at another readout. 'I'm only getting heat signatures from the weapons, nothing from the firers. They must have found a way to mask themselves… There are only a few readings, but there could be many more there who just aren't shooting yet, for whatever reason.'*

*Simmun shrugged. 'Let's find out. Signal the troops to punch through, but be ready for some quick manoeuvring if this is a trap.'*

*'Sir,' Trav acknowledged.*

*Simmun's communicator pinged, a command priority alert, and he opened the channel. 'Captain Simmun.'*

'Overlord. Crater. Longing. Sky. Vestibule. Rivet.'

*Simmun stiffened. Anyone watching his face would have seen his pupils dilate, and a faint sheen of sweat appear on his brow. He unbuttoned the holster of his sidearm: a tiny movement, even in the confines of the vehicle, and one that went unnoticed by Trav, or any of the crew.*

*'Confirmation?' he croaked.*

'Midnight,' *intoned the deep voice in his ear.*

*No one below the rank of colonel knew that the entire Conservation's officer corps had been hypno-conditioned to respond to certain key phrases. No one below the rank of general knew what those phrases were. So Captain Simmun didn't know why he'd asked for confirmation, or what anything that had just been said actually meant. Nor did he know why he'd drawn his sidearm. He only realised that he'd done so when the cold metal of the barrel was placed against his temple by his own hand, and the faint voice screaming in the back of his head that* this was wrong, this was wrong *was drowned out by the white noise that sluiced through his brain, carrying all his thoughts away with it, and leaving only impulses in its wake.*

*Captain Simmun pulled the trigger at the exact same time as the Alpha Legion sprang their trap, and dozens of bolters opened up on all sides of his column. The ogryns faltered, their existing orders to advance and engage*

*the enemy in front of them warring with their deep-seated instincts to fight back at those now attacking them from their flanks. They died in droves: mighty warriors without the wit to think for themselves, and left stranded with no guidance to turn to.*

The first questioner looks at their two companions. Their two companions look back.

‘I feel that the Council of Truth is satisfied,’ the second questioner states.

‘I concur,’ says the third questioner.

‘As do I,’ agrees the first questioner. ‘The truth has been examined, and the account given of it suffices. The subject’s statements hold merit.’

‘Then the council is concluded,’ the second questioner says. All four rise, including the primarch, and bow from the neck: a sign of respect amongst equals, for in these circumstances the Alpha Legion makes no differentiation between legionnaire and primarch, or even between primarch and human agent. Then the second and the third questioner leave, walking between the benches to the chamber’s exit, but the first remains, holding the primarch in silent regard. The primarch stands and returns the gaze, two helms staring at each other, one ornate and one plain.

Alpharius reaches up and removes his helm. ‘Well spoken, brother.’

Omegon also reaches up, and removes the crested helm of the Alpha Legion’s primarch. A sly smile crosses his face: a face that is identical in every regard to the one that has just addressed him.

‘You are too kind, brother. And may I thank you in turn, for your excellent final question? It made me think before I answered.’

‘What is the purpose of a Council of Truth, except to examine our own assumptions?’ Alpharius asks, with a smile the mirror image of his twin’s. ‘But I believe your answers did indeed satisfy our fellows who were also present.’

‘That is good,’ Omegon says. ‘It would not do for the Legion to harbour doubts about our methods. In that much, at least, we are as vulnerable as Guilliman’s dogma-loving Thirteenth.’

‘No force is perfect,’ Alpharius replies.

‘Not all of our brothers would agree with that sentiment,’ Omegon reminds him.

‘I won’t repeat it to them,’ Alpharius says, with a serpent’s smile. He pauses for a moment.

‘Your answers… they were good. But were they true?’
Omegon replaces the crested helm upon his head.
‘They were as true as they needed to be. To achieve what must be done.’

*OceanofPDF.com*

# TERMINUS

Chris Wraight

*OceanofPDF.com*

Caipha Morarg knelt, his knees sinking into Terra’s dark earth. His fists hit the soil. He vomited.

He was wearing his helm, the old Mk II one, and it filled up quickly. Once, that wouldn’t have been a problem. The filters would have snapped open, keeping his airways clear and siphoning it all off. But now the filters were clogged, and he felt his nostrils and mouth fill up, and his eyes blur with mucus and acid.

He gasped for air, and reached for the seal at his neck. It wouldn’t open. The catch had rusted shut three days ago and he hadn’t been able to prise it clear since.

He should have been drowning by then, but he wasn’t. He should have been gagging uncontrollably, but the reflex stopped firing. He swallowed. He opened his eyes. He felt lumpy matter swill around him, and somehow he didn’t need to breathe, or swallow, or see.

He calmed down. A kind of vision returned to him, clouded now in green. He saw his own hands claw through the mulch below him. He saw the dust of Terra, turned black by munitions and chem run-off, flaking over the finger-plates of his gauntlet.

A boot intruded on the picture. Morarg looked up, and blearily saw Zadal

Crosius standing over him. The Apothecary cumbersomely got down on his knees alongside him.

‘What ails you, brother?’ he asked.

Morarg laughed, coughing up more bile. ‘What does not?’

Crosius didn’t laugh. It was probably harder on him, all of this. The Apothecaries of the Death Guard had been renowned, back at the start. They had presided over the warriors that could absorb all poisons, carry on fighting even when the tox-clouds rolled across the trenches. They had been skilled with their own poisons, too – the ones that cured, that invaded the bloodstream and did battle at the cellular level. Now, what was left for them? They would have to find something else to do to justify a place in the Legion. There were no cures left, not when everything, absolutely everything, was a sickness.

Morarg shifted painfully onto his side, reclining into the thick mud. It was good, for just a moment, to let his aching joints rest.

‘How can I be purging again?’ he asked, sourly. ‘Haven’t eaten for days.’

None of them had. The stores on all the warships were rotten. None of them seemed to need to eat. Surely they would have to, at some stage.

Crosius took out a wrench, reached for a tap-valve at Morarg’s throat, and managed to twist it open. The vomitus drained away, staining an already filthy breastplate with another stripe of brown-grey.

‘You’re still asking questions,’ Crosius said. ‘That’s good. Not many still ask questions.’

‘Maybe they’re wise.’

Crosius scanned him with a blotch-lensed auspex. ‘I dislike the lassitude. It’s worse than everything else. We were never incurious.’

He rose. Morarg managed to get to his feet, too, somewhat awkwardly. The servos down the right-hand side of his armour were jammed, meaning he had to haul the weight of his armour using his body. That made him much slower than he had been, but then again his body was changing too, and who knew where that process would end up? Maybe his speed would return. Or maybe it would be traded for something more useful. He reached for his blade – a gladius with a blunted edge, glistening with a film of chems. The taste of his own stomach acid fizzed on his chapped lips.

Ahead of him ran the trench-plains, the mass of interlocked kill-zones created by the defenders of the Throneworld. The landscape was drear, clouded by fogs, pocked with ruined guntowers and wrecked war machines.

The walls of the Palace itself could be glimpsed as a high grey screen in the far distance. They looked like a continental shelf, or a geological fault. They were still a long, long way off.

All around him, stretching out in a ragged line, other Death Guard were advancing, grey shadows in the fog, trudging slowly, one step at a time. The march was eerily quiet – the suck of boots in the muck, the wheeze of respiratory systems, the grind of corroded armour-joints. Every so often a weapon would discharge with a flare of plasma or a swoosh of phosphex. Rigid taxonomies were breaking down, and warriors used what they felt like using. Some of those guns had bulbous new additions, pulsing like lung-sacs. Some looked ready to fall apart.

Ahead of them was an isolated defence tower, thrusting out of the toxin-swamp like the prow of a ship, blackened by repeated impacts but still operational. The sector defenders had fallen back there – the remnants of three or four broken infantry battalions from overrun trench systems. The place really should be levelled, though the prospect filled Morarg with weariness. He could just sink into the mud. Rest for a while.

Crosius was already moving, though, hoisting a snub-nosed cannon of some kind onto his shoulder, where it nestled amid decaying needle-thickets and extractor-nests.

‘Work to do, brother,’ the Apothecary said.

Morarg followed him.

‘As always,’ he said, sourly.

It was hard to remember how it had all happened. Morarg had no idea how long they had been stranded in the warp before breaking into attack range of Terra. It could have been a lifetime. It might have been longer.

Everything was a struggle to pin down. He felt strangely ancient, and yet the change had happened just before the fleet had crashed back into realspace. In truth he was still all new, remade, fresh christened at the font of decay.

Only snatches and fragments of the transformation remained. He could remember a long period where he had been lucid, crouched against the floor of a long snaking corridor aboard the *Terminus Est*, watching the flies boil out of the broken atmosphere-seals. He had tried to crawl away from them, clunking heavily down the passage with his armour denting the floor panels. They had got in despite that, squirming and flocking, filling his air-

intakes, wriggling against his flesh. He had screamed, and they had poured down his throat, making him gag and gag again.

How had that struggle ended? He didn't remember. He didn't even know if it had happened just like that. There had been many bad dreams, crazy dreams, locked in those narrow tubes and gantries, strung out for hours, days, months, years. The ships had all been like tombs, hanging immobile in the warp, their protective canopies compromised, their innards ringing with screams, or dreams of them, or visions of dreams.

Now he looked up again. The defence tower was within shot range, but he didn't take up a gun. He still had his blade in his hand, and that would do. He could see targets, greasy blurs on his inner visor scanner – a collection of ragged Imperial squads, cut off by the previous offensive, trying to get back to the tower. They were on foot, jogging and limping. Morarg saw that they wore a mix of uniforms and armour plates. Some were well armed, hauling heavy weapons that were still functioning properly. Others looked little more than beggars. These were the remnants of older actions, the scraps left over from greater offensives. Every horizon was alight with furious conflicts, making the earth tremble and buck, but here, in this place, it was half-empty, the haunt of the slow and the out-of-place, a mist-shrouded hinterland of dreamlike residues. They would have to march for a long time before they encountered the infernos of combat they had been promised.

Crosius had gone ahead of him. He saw the Apothecary fire his shoulder-mounted cannon. A puff of brown-green swirled out, and a shell of some sort smacked right into the middle of the retreating band of defenders. It exploded with a wet slap, splattering a dozen of them with a luminous film. They all started shrieking at once, clawing at their helms. A few others, further out from the blast radius, turned to fire back, sending streams of las-fire and solid rounds into Crosius. The Apothecary just soaked it all up, still lumbering studiously, getting ready to fire again.

Even before the change, Crosius would not have been seriously inconvenienced by such warriors, but he would have at least made some attempt to evade the shots, or to respond to them with a greater level of aggression. He would have charged at them, perhaps, getting into blade range without the need to waste a shell. Now he just walked as if in a daze, cloaked in his new absorbent skin of mottled ceramite-and-flesh.

'Can we still feel it?' Morarg asked himself, looking down at his own

grime-encrusted hands. ‘Can I still stir my blood?’

Then he looked up at the tower. It was a solid thing, an ugly thing, built of rockcrete blocks around a metal core. Las-fire spat from its upper parapet in concentrations that might conceivably do some damage. A few hundred defenders had made it there. The wretches fleeing from Crosius might add to their number if they weren’t cut down in the open. They must have known they were all going to die in that place, cut off from the main retreat, isolated out in the wastes.

Were they despairing yet? Were they ready to make their own pacts with whatever powers they believed in, to stave off annihilation?

That thought made him strangely angry. But that was good. He started to swing the blade around him, lubricating the joints of his armour, trying to get some feeling back.

The tower loomed ahead. The Death Guard were closing in now, advancing slowly in ones and twos, no tactical formations, coming from all directions.

‘Get ready,’ Morarg grunted, swinging the blade. ‘Get ready.’

Afterwards, he and Crosius sat in what had been a watch-station right at the summit of the defence tower. The windows were all smashed, the instruments destroyed. They sat next to one another with their backs against the wall. Crosius had taken an instrument from his backpack – something thin and spidery – and was turning it over and over in his palm. Morarg had laid his blade on his knees. It was coated in fresh blood now, much of which ran in sticky rivulets down his armour.

A head, newly relieved of its accompanying body, faced them. It was a human female’s, still with the helmet on, grimy cheeks visible under a smeared visor. Beyond that were other body parts, some half-encased in armour plates, some like sides of rotting meat. It already smelled bad.

Morarg looked at the head.

‘When did you last see him?’ he asked.

‘Who?’ said Crosius.

‘The primarch.’

The Apothecary thought for a moment. ‘A long time ago.’

Morarg’s own last memory of Mortarion was on the bridge of the *Endurance*, a few days back. The primarch had been slumped in his command throne, surrounded by a fog of chemical gases so thick that his

outline was almost entirely obscured. Morarg had seen those great new wings, though, like webs of dirty gauze, spread up and out, bent under the throne canopy.

‘He made the choice,’ Morarg said, morosely.

‘That is his burden.’

‘So where were you, when you realised?’

‘Realised?’

‘That he had made it. For all of us.’

Crosius thought about it. The needles in the device made a snicking sound as something retracted, and that briefly distracted him. ‘I don’t remember. The *Terminus Est*? I think so. We all went over, didn’t we? When Typhon–’

‘Don’t say his name.’

‘Calas. Is that better? When he… I was there, I think. It smelled different, even before.’ Crosius’ head angled back slowly, coming to rest against the rockcrete. ‘I saw the primarch, there, in the middle of it all, from a distance. He was coming up from the lower decks. I was sick. We were all sick. I couldn’t do anything for myself, couldn’t do anything for anyone else. I followed him, I wanted to talk. I thought maybe I might be able to… but it was all gone, by then.’

‘He wouldn’t have wanted anything from you.’

‘No, but I wasn’t thinking. None of us were.’ Crosius exhaled, and a fine grey mist slid out of his helm grille. ‘I caught his face, for a moment, though the lights were going on and off. So I saw him in bits. In snatches. At times, it seemed he was laughing. At times, screaming. I called out. I said this was a warp trick. We needed to dig deeper. Would he issue a command? Would he tell me what to do? I would do anything. We were all willing to die, if that was the command.’

Morarg listened. ‘What did he say?’

‘I don’t know if he heard me. There was this… howling. All the time. I think it might have been howling for weeks. You remember how it was. The howling, in the ships, that made you think your mind had gone.’

Morarg did not. The ship had never howled for him. Instead, it had been the flies, in his eyes, in his stomach, buzzing, biting.

‘But then he did see me, and I saw him, and he was already changing, and I knew then that he’d done something. It was the way he looked. Like nothing I’d ever seen before. He’d been angry. He’d been morose. Hells, I’d seen him in pain, just for a moment.’

Morarg looked at the head. It was beginning to tilt over in its pool of blood. ‘So what was it?’

‘I don’t know. It was like he’d just realised something. Something that had been wearing at him for years, and now he understood it. He wasn’t shocked. He wasn’t surprised.’ Crosius thought about it. ‘There was only one other time I saw an expression like that. Back during the Akasta Compliance. I was treating a battle-brother for a spinal injury, long-term, that had hampered his combat. He’d given himself thirty per cent increased load-drills, trying to punish it out. He’d only come to see me under orders. We found the problem. It wasn’t his spine. He’d taken shot-damage to the jacks under his carapace, so the problem was the armour. When I told him, I saw that same expression. Now he understood. Now he realised why all that effort hadn’t improved it. It never would have. All wasted effort, but now he could get it fixed.’ Crosius’ fingers returned to the needle-array, moving unconsciously. ‘He wasn’t happy. You couldn’t be happy, having done all that for nothing. So it wasn’t even relief. It was like…’

The Apothecary trailed off.

Morarg didn’t say anything for a while. Talking was harder work than it had been before. He got phlegm in the back of his throat, and he could never clear it.

‘I’ll ask you something now,’ he said at last. ‘I’ll ask you it once, and I’ll never ask it again.’

Crosius turned to face him, and listened.

‘Did he make the right decision?’

No reply came.

‘What I mean is,’ Morarg said, now the words were out, with more on the way, ‘that was what we lived for. No one endures more than we do. I don’t even remember how long it lasted. It must have been a trick. Witchery. Could we have outlasted it?’ He shook his head. ‘Look at me. I don’t know what kind of bargain he made. I’m not sure we came out on the right side of it.’

Crosius laughed. At least, it might have been a laugh. ‘No? You never had much imagination, brother.’ He held up the needle-array. ‘I take hits now, and I barely feel them. I don’t need to eat. I don’t need to sleep. My mind works better. Before, I was a crass butcher. I’d take out progenoids, staple up bolt-wounds. Wasting my time. Now, though. Now, I have *ideas*.’

The Apothecary shuffled forward, stowing the array, and got to his feet.

The whole process took three times as long as it once did, with every movement ponderous and effort-laden.

‘You’re right,’ Crosius said. ‘Never ask that again. You and me, we both knew him on Barbarus. We were both on that ship. He never gave an order that wasn’t the right one. He is who he is.’

Then he lumbered off. As he went, his boot crushed the disembodied head, crunching the helm as if it were made of porcelain.

Morarg watched him go.

‘Then why isn’t he here?’ he asked, out loud. ‘Why are we on this world, when he is not?’

From the tower, the Death Guard went north, heading towards the first line of walls proper. No orders came in from the fleet in orbit. In the past, the orders would have been sent in advance, meticulously prepared, all eventualities covered. The ingress routes would all have been plotted, the milestones charted, responsibilities assigned. The Legion was not known for tactical flexibility, but it had always had a reputation for thoroughness.

Now, though, the ships in orbit were silent. Those warriors who had been landed made their own way, operating on only the vaguest instructions. They knew the destination, and they knew the likely levels of resistance, but everything in between was a blur.

It didn’t matter. They marched like automata, getting used to the way their bodies functioned now, feeling the gravitational pull of this world that, for most of them, was alien territory.

Perhaps that was the idea. Let them discover themselves. Flex new muscles against slime and filth, before the true test – fighting once again against Legiones Astartes.

Morarg trudged through the stink. He fought when he had to, which was only when some desperate band of defenders burst from the cover of bombed-out habs to try to take him down. The landscape around him had once been a cityscape, filled with inhabited spires the rival to anything in the wider Imperium. Now it was a horizontal land of rubble heaps and spike-ruins, overwatched by a bile-black sky and rocked by the constant rumble of munitions. The northern horizon took the place of a sun, and was constantly alight, making all shadows run southwards. Just occasionally, in the aftermath of some colossal flash, you could even see the profile of the Palace itself, monumental and unmoving, a leviathan splayed across the far

arch of the world, yet to be approached, let alone breached.

The closer he got, the heavier his tread became. Morarg began to imagine a great dome of heat-wash, trembling ahead of him, pushing him back. It was as if something, or someone, knew just what had been done to them, what turgid presences now fizzed through their clotted veins, and repelled it all.

He never slept. Sleep was for another age, one in which his armour had come cleanly away from the plugs in his body. He dreamed, though – a waking reverie, with his eyes open. He saw the rulers of old Barbarus stalking ahead of him, milk-pale in the mists, grinning as they had once done when they were masters.

Throwing them down had been the great achievement. After they were killed, it had felt, briefly, as if there were no tyrants left, and no suffering, and only open skies.

And for that, you would follow him. You would ignore the tics, the preoccupations, the lapses. You knew that he had suffered too, thrown into a world that was not his own, and tortured, and made to doubt. You would see that he had retained the core of himself, and had triumphed. And, later, you would see that he received no credit for that from the empire he had become a part of. He was scorned, despite all he had done. And that scorn pulled the Legion together, and made them tight as a clenched gauntlet, so that every insult was remembered and nursed, and every scrap of strength was gathered and kept lean for the purpose of restoring the ledgers.

Morarg had no doubt that other Legions admired their primarchs. He had no doubt that they fought well for them, anxious to win praise or avoid disgrace. But he knew this, too – that few loved their liege lord as they did. For an outsider to the Death Guard, they were a morose band of grime-streaked plodders, despised even by their allies. For an insider, they were merely as the universe had made them. They were hard steel, alloyed fast, tempered in the furnaces of disdain. The rust was only a surface illusion, or had been, something to hide their power and make an enemy underestimate them.

‘Death Guard,’ an outsider, an Ultramarine, had once said to Morarg during an uneasy joint campaign. ‘I think, sometimes, that is an unhealthy name.’

Morarg had not attempted to justify it to him. If he had done so, he might have said that a son of Macragge could know nothing of death, not truly,

being raised on worlds of preservation and order. If he had been surrounded by it from birth, made aware of it as a part of existence, as common as water or a heartbeat, he would understand. The Legion did not celebrate death, but nor did they guard against it, or try to hold it back. Even before the great change, they had held it in their arms, feeling its cold breath mingling with theirs, cloaking themselves in its white shadow.

He looked up then, roused from his thoughts. A few hundred metres away, another great bastion loomed out of the condensate, rearing high. Its crown was intact, studded with fixed cannons. Faint red lights blinked on and off across dark flanks. An aquila had been carved over its high lintel, as black as the stone around it.

Morarg paused. This place would not so easily be laid low. The Death Guard came to a halt, strung out thinly, tiny specks against the upcoming fortress.

He looked down at his blade. He held it up into the weak light, and saw the angry glow of the horizon-burn reflect against its cutting edge.

Except that the horizon was not the source of the light. The light was flooding down from up above, fiery, refracting and churning like water. The dust at his feet stirred, whipped up by suddenly churning air. The oily water sitting at the base of the blast craters chopped and slapped. From somewhere ahead – perhaps the bastion itself – a warning klaxon started to bray.

Morarg looked up. The racing clouds broke open. Shafts of pale illumination lanced through them, spearing down to the blackened earth. A lander broke through, shadowed by hovering Stormbirds. It was huge, steaming and flame-flickered from its orbital passage, underpinned with an array of heavy thrusters that now blasted hard to arrest its descent.

Morarg lumbered backwards, slipping as he did so, trying to put as much distance as he could between himself and that thing. Lightning crackled around it as it came down, dancing across beaten-metal panels bearing the Death Guard sigil. Even as it came to touch down, he could see the deep-soaked damage across every part of it – the rust, the blown rivets, the cracks. None of that could have been caused by weapons. The lander was changing all by itself, just as they all were changing.

Eventually the fires coughed out, and the whole contraption smacked heavily to earth, its extended legs sinking a metre-deep into the mud. A gang-ramp extended and lowered. Pale gas vented, tumbling out of grilles

and tube-mouths, cascading down a long shallow slope.

From the aperture, less than twenty metres from where Morarg stood, eight figures emerged. Seven of them were giants, their armour encrusted with filth so thick that it formed an ablative curtain all of its own. They carried reaper-blades, iron-bound heels clanging as they descended.

The eighth was the master, and he was colossal. He had grown obscenely, stretched, as if pulled by a god's eager fingers, his bones cracking and his grey skin tearing. His face was hidden behind a rebreather, his eyes shadowed by a tattered cowl. His huge moth-wings unfurled as he emerged, too big to be missed, too flimsy to carry him aloft, surely. Were they affectations? Were they curses?

He came down the ramp, limping, supporting himself on the stave of his scythe. Morarg watched him come. All the Death Guard watched him come. They were silent. Some would not have laid eyes on him since the great change itself. Even Morarg, one of those who had been close to him in counsel for a long time, had not seen him properly since then, only through veils and shadows.

Now the primarch was out in the open again, lit by the weak sun of his birthworld. He looked too tall, too extended, a scarecrow in motley armour, held together by rotting strips of linen, or maybe sorcery, or maybe just his will.

Mortarion, Lord of Death, reached the end of the ramp. His cloven boots sank into the broken ground. As they touched it, the mud dried up, split open, and tendrils of dark growth shot up and entwined over his boots before desiccating, freezing and dying. The air curdled, and the stench of sulphur wafted across an already pungent landscape of varied stinks.

The primarch paused. Then, slowly, he lowered himself to his knees. He extended a claw and gathered up a clod of earth. He kneaded it for a moment, then pressed it to his rebreather, as if he wanted to taste it, or inhale its aroma, or perhaps just feel it against his withered skin.

Then he rose. The movements were cumbersome, slow, as if made underwater, accompanied by the squeals and creaks of his ramshackle armour.

Morarg walked up to him warily. He didn't know why, really, only that it had been a long time, and an equerry ought to be beside his lord.

Mortarion let him come. The Deathshroud fell back.

***'I wished to taste it,'*** the primarch said, in a voice that was like the rattle

of wind over grave-chimes. ***‘But of course, it has changed. We have all of us changed.’***

Morarg came to a halt before his primarch, craning his neck to look up at his face. ‘My hearts are gladdened to see you again, lord.’

Mortarion’s face creased under the cowl, as if a dry smile disfigured the features, or a grimace. ***‘I would have come sooner. My father has made this place poison for me. Perhaps the only poison that could affect me now. Still, I am used to that.’*** He looked out, looked up, his gaze falling on the bastion ahead. Now, suddenly, the place did not look quite so impressive. ***‘And He weakens now. Little by little, His power erodes. We shall squeeze Him, eh? We shall squeeze the last of that cold blood from Him.’***

Morarg didn’t understand. His mind seemed more sluggish than it had once been. Or perhaps it was just different – able to grasp some things more surely, apt to lose its grip on others. His confusion must have been obvious, for Mortarion didn’t move off, or take up his scythe, but remained where he was, standing ankle deep in the rotting vegetation his presence had conjured.

***‘You are not what you were, Caipha,’*** Mortarion said. ***‘You were once a wretch on a toxic world. I made you something else. Then my father made you something else again. And now an older power intervenes, and you are altered a third time. Are you still the same person? You have the same name. That may be what binds us back to the source. Our names. Our signifiers. Everything else – the blades, the flesh, the powers – they do not persist.’***

He drew closer to Morarg, towering over him, shedding new and fouler stenches with every movement. ***‘I am become what I hated. I am become without end, without beginning. I am become unnatural. I cannot cross His boundary. I offend against His sense of… hygiene.’***

The next word came to Morarg’s lips too easily, as if summoned by a spell. ‘Daemon.’

***‘It brings gifts with it,’*** Mortarion agreed. ***‘I see where His mind walks, now. I see His nature, burning like a flame in the void. I even understand some of the things He did.’*** A hoarse laugh. ***‘Too late, now, of course.’***

‘And yet… is it?’ Morarg’s voice was edged with desperation. ‘You could take us back, could you not? If you willed it?’

The primarch didn’t seem to hear the question. Or perhaps it did not

deserve an answer.

***'I spent my life looking for the ends of things,'*** he said, softly, speaking to himself. ***'I wished for an end to suffering. I wished for an end to the desires that plagued me. Then I wished for an end to this rotten empire, and thought that was my last challenge. Whenever I got what I wished for, I saw another end ahead of me, something else to accomplish. But then, on Calas' damned ship, I made the final choice, and erased the very idea. There is the paradox – I spoke the word, and from that moment, I had always done it. I had always been like this. I have memories from a time before I was born. I have memories from events that have yet to take place. I see the world of the senses like a rumpled cloak spread out before me, and I struggle to hold on to its hem.'***

And then Morarg understood. There was no going back. It was not just impossible – it made no sense now. There was no *back*.

'Then…' he started, uncertainly, feeling the sicknesses boil within him, feeling his muscles atrophy, 'what is to be done now?'

Mortarion drew himself up to his full height. He extended his claw, and the soil of Terra fell from its outstretched talons.

The air thickened. The sound of buzzing intensified, and it became markedly hotter. A rumble ran along the landscape, opening up fissures that gaped and popped.

Morarg felt a bitter taste at the back of his throat, a ringing in his ears, and found himself wanting to scrabble away. He recognised the tang of it from the *Terminus Est*, the same forces that had run rampant across those disease-crammed decks.

His gaze followed the direction of the primarch's arm, just in time to see the terrain around the distant bastion erupt. The land under it rebelled, bursting apart amid clouds of frenzied buzzing. Huge cracks leapt up the outer walls, from which black-green foliage spilled like entrails. More alarms went off, pathetic against the gathering thunder of breaking earth. An explosion rang out, releasing bursts of green-tinged lightning, then another. A watchtower collapsed in a pall of rubble-dust, and the great aquila snapped in two. It was as if a thousand years of degradation had been accelerated into a few moments, running rampant in a deranged vid-sequence.

The Death Guard assembled there watched in silence. They never said a word. One by one, seeing the devastation unfold, they started to march

towards the fortress. As the outer walls tumbled, they mutely lowered their weapons towards the many breaches. Death, and the promise of death, was calling them again.

Mortarion began to advance with them, keeping his sorcerous grip locked on the bastion the whole time. As he went, the air around him split, bursting and sliding like tallow on glass. His claw tightened, and more adamantium blast-plates folded into spinning debris. The Deathshroud came along with him, revenants of decay, their scythes crackling with black-edged energies.

The aura of ruin was a sham. Morarg watched the whole time, and saw the power coiled up within that decrepit shell of rags. He realised then what had been bargained for. This was power beyond a dream. This was a power beyond time. This was despair fermented in eternity, the primal ache that would one day smother the stars themselves.

He fell in behind Mortarion, marching in silent lockstep.

‘What is to be done?’ he breathed, swinging his blunt blade in readiness. ‘What we have always done. Endure.’

*OceanofPDF.com*

# THE ABYSSAL EDGE

Aaron Dembski-Bowden

*OceanofPDF.com*

## I

*‘Whatever the officers of the Eighth Legion are recording in their own archives at this moment is a matter for their own black consciences. I am a legionary of the Thousand Sons. I deal only in truth.’*

## II

*‘Part of me wonders if my primarch will soften his own accounting so as not to speak ill of his brother, the barbarian Curze. I do not believe for a moment he will be anything but honest, but honesty can be naked, or it can be dressed in veils of mercy. Lord Magnus is a forgiving man – wise, where his brother is spiteful. Beneficent, where Curze is bitter.’*

## III

*‘The Devastation of Zoah marks only the second time I have stood by my primarch’s side in battle. I am not blind to the honour done to me during this compliance, when I was in the presence of not one but two of the Emperor’s sons. Nor am I blind to the mistakes made that led to the*

*campaign's catastrophic failure.*

*I seek not to shift blame according to subjective whim. I intend instead to assign fault, objectively and thoroughly, where it belongs. The Night Lords have already disengaged, leaving us alone. Doubtless they go to take their moronic viciousness elsewhere, parading their ignorance as the ultimate virtue, claiming they did only what had to be done.*'

## IV

'*And so it comes to be that we stand here in the ashes, sifting through the powdery remains of revelation. It is too late to change a thing. Too late to do anything but mourn what was lost.*

*Everything is gone. All is dust.*'

Ulatal lowered the data-slate. For a time there was silence, or at least something close to it. The sound of his own laboured breathing was wet and tidal, punctuated by occasional draws on his aspirator. Beyond the gentle, unhealthy sounds of his own continuing life, the chamber had fallen entirely quiet.

'What do I do with this?' He tossed the data-slate onto his work desk, feeling the fluid in his respiratory tract shift as he leaned forward. Ulatal was more than a little weary of that liquid gurgle in his chest.

'Forgive me,' said the servitor standing in the corner. 'I am having trouble parsing your query. To what are you referring?'

Ulatal looked over at the dead-eyed, monotone creature, and waved a hand in the vague direction of the data-slate.

'This. What exactly am I supposed to do with this?'

'Forgive me, I am having trouble parsing your query. You appear to have indicated the chamber wall. Is this accurate?'

Ulatal resisted the urge to scream. Instead he jabbed his finger against the data-slate's screen, hammering it half a dozen times with his fingertip. 'No, you piece of… This. *This.* The report. What do I do with the report?'

The servitor didn't move, didn't even blink. 'Reports are to be organised, notarised and filed for pre-archival secondary processing.'

'Why did they assign you to me?' This wasn't the first time Ulatal had asked the question. 'You're as much use as a rock in a game of regicide. How do I deal with a report like this?'

'Reports are to be organised, notarised and filed for secondary processing.'

‘Shut up,’ Ulatal said with dangerous calm.

‘Compliance,’ the servitor replied obediently, and entered silent running.

‘And if you speak again in the next day cycle, I’ll shoot you. That’s not just a promise, it’s a solemn vow.’

He could do it, too. They’d not taken his sidearm away. Admittedly, he was never likely to use it in an occupational capacity again, but its familiar weight on his hip did a little to counterbalance the feeling of helplessness from the bloody fluid in his lungs and guts.

The servitor stared at him, caught between conflicting imperatives. ‘I must remind you that destruction of Expeditionary Fleet resources and materiel is prohibited under the codes of cond–’

A needle-thin beam of concentrated energy speared through the servitor’s chest. There was no dramatic impact, no bodily momentum crashing the cyborg back against the wall, just a scorched hole about the size of a thumbnail directly through the servitor’s heart. It tried valiantly (or irritatingly, from Ulatal’s perspective) to finish its sentence, then slumped down where it had stood. The bionic plate of its skull clanked almost tenderly back against the wall.

Ulatal lowered the laspistol, cursing softly. Another thing the damn crash had taken from him: he’d been aiming for the bastard’s head.

Annoyed, and using that annoyance to mask his unease, he holstered his sidearm and rubbed his temples.

‘Now shut up,’ he said to the twitching servitor.

It said, ‘Compliance…’ on the third attempt. Then with blood bubbling from its mouth, the servitor obeyed its final order.

Perdita came to see him later that day. A maintenance crew had cleaned the servitor away by the time she arrived. Ulatal’s gaze flicked to where Perdita wore her new rank insignia on her shoulders and chest – and damn if that didn’t hurt a little. She picked her way through the tumbledown chaos of his chamber, glancing at the las-burn scorch in the wall.

‘Don’t,’ Ulatal warned her. ‘Maintenance already lectured me.’ He gave a nasty little smile that only lifted one side of his face. ‘I told them it was an accidental weapon discharge.’

‘I wasn’t going to say a word, sir.’ After a moment, she wrinkled her nose. ‘Except that it smells like something died in here.’

Ulatal took that judgement in the spirit it was intended. Bathing hadn’t

been all that high on his priorities since the crash. Bathing took three times longer than it used to, and hurt an order of magnitude above that. He could've taken the nerve-suppressors allotted to him by the medicae, but they left him dazed and exhausted.

'It's not *sir* any more,' he pointed out.

She could have flinched at his bladed tone, and he was surprised she didn't. It probably would've been better if she had; then he'd have been spared the gentleness in her reply.

'It will always be *sir*,' she said.

'Don't patronise me, Dita.' Ulatal practically grunted the words. 'How's the squadron?'

'Adjusting. Did you see we're flying fleet patrol again?'

Of course he'd seen. She was still sending him the bloody duty roster every week. He didn't know how he felt about that. Was it charity? Sympathy? Pity?

He nodded to her question, not trusting his voice for a moment. Perdita straightened her uniform as she looked around the room again, not meeting his eyes. Throne, if Dita was coming in here and looking awkward, things really were bad.

'You forgot to say I'm looking better,' he goaded her.

As easily as that, the tension vanished. She grinned. 'You look no different from a week ago.'

'Yeah, I'm a prince these days. I hear they're going to put my face on the two-credit coin.'

She stood at sudden attention. 'Permission to lie, sir.'

Now that was more like it. Ulatal found himself smiling too. 'Permission denied, commander.'

'Yes, sir. Then it's with regret that I inform you that you look like shit, sir.'

Ulatal chuckled. The slime in his lungs and guts chuckled with him, and he could've lived without that, but it still felt good to laugh.

'At ease, commander.'

Perdita stood at ease, then wordlessly used the edge of her boot to scuff some of his smallclothes under the bed. In her eyes, he read the disapproval she was too polite to speak aloud. His officer's quarters, once so ordered and pristine, were becoming a little… domestic.

'So why am I here?' she asked.

'Because I need a new archival servitor. The last one died in an accidental

weapons discharge.’

She raised an eyebrow and hiked a thumb at the door. ‘I can just leave, you know.’

Ulatal smoothed his palm down his unshaven face and, with the awkward gait of the newly-mutilated, he limped forwards on the bionic limb that replaced his lost leg. He had to suck on his aspirator, and after *that* wonderful indignity, what was left of his face twisted into a half smile amidst the burn scarring.

‘You’re here because I think I’m in trouble, Dita.’ He handed her the data-slate. ‘Look at this.’

About halfway through, the colour drained from her face. By the time she lowered the data-slate, disbelief was fighting with discomfort for control of her expression.

‘Is this real?’ she asked.

Ulatal thumbed a code into his workstation, bringing up a hololithic display of a world with three moons, ringed by icons depicting two battlefleets.

‘This is Zoah, and… whatever its bloody moons are called. And this is the 3,283rd Expeditionary Fleet. It’s broken up now. It wasn’t a true Expeditionary Fleet at all, just another ad hoc armada forming when two Imperial fleets find their spheres of conquest overlapping.’

He gestured to two of the icons, lighting them on the display and bolding their names. The first read *Photep*. The second, *Nightfall*. The flagships of the XV and VIII Legiones Astartes.

‘At Zoah, the unified host resulted in not just two Legions being forced to work together, but two primarchs.’

She handed the data-slate back to him. He took it, though he didn’t want to. Neither of them seemed to want to hold it for long. ‘So Zoah is real,’ Perdita ventured, ‘but what about the veracity of the events in the report?’

Ulatal raised a finger, a teacher making a point. ‘That’s the question.’

Perdita was watching him with an expression he couldn’t quite read. The ambiguity surprised him, given how long they’d flown together.

‘What? Why are you looking at me like that?’

‘Did you ask for this assignment, sir? Or did they give it to you?’

Ulatal snorted. ‘I didn’t want to be removed from active service while I convalesced. I think they agreed because they were scared that if I had too

much time to think, I'd swallow a round from my sidearm. If you're asking whether I specifically asked for archive oversight duty, then no. I just wanted something to do.'

He gestured around the chamber, in all its sparse grandeur. 'What amazes me is that there are ranking Crusade officers who spend their lives overseeing this work.'

Perdita fixed him with a disapproving glare. 'It's a vital duty. This work is integral to the Great Crusade. To humanity itself. These are the records future generations will read, learning how we conquered the stars.'

*How grand.* Ulatal's inner voice was slick and sly with the thought. *How very grand that sounds.*

'It's a dull duty, Dita.' He grunted something that was almost a laugh. 'At least, it was until I got a report saying two primarchs now despise each other. None of the other missions I've archived were anything like this.'

'I don't understand you, sir. You're diminishing the work with one breath, and fixated upon it with the next. You're shaking with unspent energy.'

'I notice you're delicately avoiding the word *obsession*.'

Her smile was a thin, sympathetic slice that softened her eyes. 'You said it, not me. So… what are you going to do?'

Ulatal dragged in a breath through his aspirator. 'I don't know. I can't find anything like it anywhere else. And how does one follow up this Thousand Sons legionary's ramblings? I'd need to go to the flagship and speak with the *Nightfall's* archivists, but that's no guarantee of getting the truth.'

'You suspect a cover-up?'

Did he? Did he, honestly? 'I suspect *something* went on out there, something between the two primarchs, and they don't want any of the little people knowing about it. This legionary broke ranks and filed his report out of… I don't know. Vanity, perhaps. Superiority. Like he had something to prove.'

Having Dita here was good. He was barely even talking to her now, but her presence let him work the problem through out loud, from another angle.

And she knew it, too. She knew him well enough to know how he worked.

'Sir?' she prompted.

'I have the authority to investigate, but…'

He let the words hang. Perdita didn't take them up in agreement, which he'd been hoping for.

‘And?’ she asked. The woman was merciless when she wanted to be.

‘And I should. I need to. It’s my duty.’ Saying it out loud plascreted it into reality. ‘It’s my duty. I was hoping you’d talk me out of it. Maybe even suggesting the file could’ve got lost or corrupted along the way.’

Perdita retightened her already immaculate ponytail. When she moved, Ulatal couldn’t help but notice her brass rank insignia pins again, flashing as they reflected the light from the overhead lumes.

‘Would you listen to me if I tried to talk you out of it?’ She looked him dead in the eyes. ‘Honestly, sir?’

He didn’t reply, which was itself an answer.

Perdita wasn’t blind. Ulatal knew she recognised the threat of fixation in her commander’s behaviour: the feverish need to see this through to the end. She’d seen it before. They all had, at one time or another – that need for a warrior to achieve *something* in the wake of going down in flames and crawling back up from the rubble.

She gambled in the silence that followed. ‘The Remembrancers have taken hold of pict-footage from the Juuvaur engagement.’

Ulatal’s throat worked. He tried and failed to swallow, hoping against hope he was keeping his emotions from his unshaven face. ‘How?’

‘How does classified military intelligence always hit the public eye, sir? Someone leaked it.’ She took a breath before speaking more. ‘They’re calling you a hero. They’re writing poems about it, painting impressions… It’s already spread to other fleets.’

He snorted, resisting a pull on his aspirator. Let his last lung clench up. Let it shrivel in his scarred chest, for all that it mattered. Anything to stop Dita sensing the thrill of fearful discomfort snaking its way down Ulatal’s spinal column.

‘Idiots,’ he said.

‘Sir, no. No. You *are* a hero. That fight was…’

She kept talking but Ulatal was no longer listening. He stared at her, his guts aching at the thought of all those ludicrous chroniclers and poets and artists watching him, watching his final mission, watching the fight itself, watching the way it ended in blood and choking smoke and shrieking engines and blood and burning iron and blood, so much blood and–

Ulatal opened his eyes, unsure of just when he’d closed them. He limped back to his chair, hating the instinctive exhalation of relief when he took his weight off his abused hip. Perdita politely pretended not to notice.

‘It suits you,’ Ulatal said at last.

‘Sir?’

‘My rank. You wear it well and we both knew it was coming. At least this way I didn’t have to lose you to another squadron when they promoted you.’

Perdita smiled. ‘Is this the part where you tell me I’m the best pilot you’ve ever known and that you’re ever so proud of me?’

‘Throne, no. *I* was the best. But you were a decent wingmate.’

‘You’ll be back with us–’

Ulatal raised a hand. ‘Spare me the groxshit, please. My flying days are done, unless they rig up my next cockpit with a seat to counterbalance all the nausea from my broken skull, and an irrigation system to handle the fact I seem to crap blood now. Throne, half my organs are synthetic clone-copies that barely function. If they cybernetically replaced everything that was wrong with me, I’d be a servitor.’ He showed his new metal teeth to illustrate the point.

‘Perhaps they’ll give you a ship. A frigate to command.’

He felt a moment of genuine horror filter into his ever-present irritation. ‘I’m a starfighter pilot. I don’t want a bloody ship, wallowing in the void with its fat arse hanging out.’ Ulatal trailed off, hearing the petulance in his own voice. ‘Although… a battleship, maybe? One of the big Glorianas. That might be fun.’

Perdita laughed, and it was music to her former commander’s ears. No charity or sympathy in that laugh. None in her eyes, either.

‘Aim high, sir,’ she said with a grin. ‘So, when do you leave?’

Ulatal rocked in his restraint throne, doing his best not to grunt in pain each time the ship buckled around him. The first moment he’d felt the engines engage and shunt the vessel forwards, all of his injuries awoke at once, determined to punish him for taking this little trip. The supply transport pulled none of the high-grav manoeuvres he’d spent a life acclimating to in the cockpit of his Rage-pattern fighter, but it was still anything but a smooth ride. The cargo-hauler felt like it rattled its way through the warp, held together more by luck than by skilled piloting or a decent hull.

Few military vessels were en route anywhere near where he needed to go. That meant he’d needed to be creative. Three weeks transit on a resupply carrier here, a month-long warp jump on a pilgrim ship there… Through a

mix of decent planning and good fortune, Ulatal had managed to make it to the final leg of his journey.

None of the ships had been much fun for his weakened constitution, but this one was the worst yet. At a particularly nasty shudder, his pained grunt melted into a teeth-clenching groan. Several of the other passengers cast a glance his way. He licked the acid taste of nausea off the back of his teeth and swallowed, too irritated to be embarrassed.

Every time he breathed in, he inhaled the sweat-stink of the other passengers. Every time he moved, he felt their eyes on him. The uneasy glances were fine; he could take those as they came. It was the looks of pity that knifed at him. The sympathetic, half-scared gazes of lifelong civilians seeing a warrior brought low.

Well, there was nothing he could do about it now, apart from not throwing up in front of them. He'd certainly not be marching in any victory parades any time soon.

'Are you all right?'

Ulatal lifted his head to the man in the restraint throne across the thoroughfare. He drew breath to reply, and managed three words before his breakfast rations and chunks of stomach lining blasted against the cage of his clenched teeth. Ulatal sagged against his restraint buckles, and when he moaned he painted the gantry floor with vomit. Groans and curses sounded out around him.

'Yeah,' he panted, head down, staring at the floor between his knees. 'Never better.'

Ulatal was in no fit state to spend too long gazing out of portholes as they glided in to dock, but he still spared himself a smile at the sight of all that void plating cast in dirty cobalt and tarnished bronze against the endless black. She was filthy from her journeys and bloodied from battle, but the *Nightfall* wasn't without her charms. If she ran out her guns, she was capable of levelling cities in minutes, and killing worlds within hours.

Disembarking took place without a hitch, and the fleet liaison had assigned him quarters. Better quarters than his own back aboard the *Serpent of the Black Seas*, which was a surprise. The liaison had known he was coming, of course. He'd followed protocol and sent word ahead of his arrival. No sense making a bad first impression.

'Wing Commander Orthos Ulatal, assigned to the Eighth Legion, seconded

to Crusade Battlefleet Archival Resources. Thank you for coming. I'd like to speak to one of your ranking Legion archivists,' he'd said to the portly, officious fellow duty-bound to welcome him aboard. 'At his earliest opportunity.'

The liaison was of Nostramo, his skin the near-albino of the bulk of that world's unhealthy population. He spoke Gothic with the mellow flair typical of the Night Lords themselves, and kept to the common tongue of the Imperium despite the fact Ulatal spoke several Nostraman dialects as fluently as any native.

'I will do what I can,' the liaison replied.

'This is important,' Ulatal stressed in the face of the other man's placidity.

'As I said, sir, I'll do what I can.'

Ulatal winced as he leaned forward to unlace his boots, and something wetly unpleasant slipped in his healing guts. 'You don't sound confident,' he pointed out. 'I've served the Eighth Legion for almost two decades, my friend. I know what Space Marine officers can be like. You don't need to be delicate about this. I trust what you're trying not to say is that your overseers are standoffish bastards?'

The liaison cleared his throat, seeking the right balance of truth and diplomacy. 'Well, they rarely fraternise with mortal crew–'

'Listen to me,' Ulatal interrupted, looking down at his data-slate again and reading through the info-spillage. 'I just need to speak to one of the flagship's archivists. Not the bloody primarch himself, nor even any of the officers. Just an archivist.'

The liaison hesitated, then gave a crisp salute. 'I think that can be arranged, sir.'

It took three days to get an answer. The liaison didn't return. When Ulatal contacted him through his quarters' crew terminal, the replies ranged from evasive to placating, always smooth, never mired by awkwardness. The last time Ulatal reached out, he was politely rebuffed by a servitor, who informed him in a monotone drawl that he should remain in his chambers and await the arrival of someone who would be able to help with his investigation.

'I can't help but think your phrasing is a little suspicious,' Ulatal replied to the lobotomised cyborg on the other end of the link. Instinct had him check his sidearm after the vox-call ended.

The warrior that pounded a fist against Ulatal’s door had come armed and armoured. The legionary towered above Ulatal, who was a tall man himself, standing clad in the brass-edged midnight ceramite of the VIII Legion. Standing this close to a Legiones Astartes warrior was never a comfortable experience, even for those used to the sheer size of them. This one, this *close*, was a revelation of immensity. In one of its hands, it held a chain-bladed glaive with a haft over three metres long. In its other hand, it held a snarling skull helmet crested with twin wings. The active power generator on the Space Marine’s back made Ulatal’s gums itch. He had to resist the unpleasant urge to rub his eyes; they felt like they were vibrating in their sockets.

Ulatal knew who it was. He’d seen the warrior’s image in countless Imperial inspirational holos relaying the deeds of Legiones Astartes heroes. He’d seen the armoured giant in almost as many classified post-mission picts, describing the VIII Legion’s many victories over the last century.

The Night Lord stared down, his inhuman eyes offering a gaze of passionless, unblinking blackness. When he spoke, his voice was the sound of an avalanche somehow given the power to sneer.

‘Greetings,’ said First Captain Jago Sevatarion. ‘You and I are going to have a conversation.’

For the first few minutes, Ulatal was quite convinced he was going to die with each movement the warrior made. He was no coward. No one could rise to his rank and win the wars he’d won if cowardice ran through their veins, yet he flinched each time Sevatarion’s armour joints snarled at the merest motion. His guts physically clenched when the warrior dropped his war spear on the table with a resounding crash. As spacious as his quarters were, the Space Marine officer took up a threatening span.

When the feeling of imminent death faded, it didn’t retreat far. Instead it was replaced by a certainty that he wouldn’t leave the room alive once his story was told. The idea of drawing his sidearm for protection was a cold and hilarious comfort; using his service laspistol on the first captain of the VIII Legion would be no more effective than throwing rocks at a Land Raider.

He’d offered the Space Marine a cup of tea from his hospitality supplies, and First Captain Sevatarion had smiled, charmed by the offer, amused by it, or doing his best to mimic politeness.

‘No. Now start talking.’

With those words, and the order within them, business had begun in earnest. Both men had sat – one with the grunt of his wounds troubling him, the other with the powered growls of his armour joints adapting to the change in posture. Ulatal handed over a data-slate with the transcribed report and relevant hololithic data. Then all he could do was wait. He sat there while the Night Lord finished reading, doing his best not to cough or clutch his pained stomach. The last thing he wanted was for the warrior to mistake his sickness for nervousness.

Sevatarion’s features were pale above his armour’s ceramite collar, the pallid flesh so typical of all Nostraman-born souls. His black eyes flickered as he read. At one point he ran his gauntleted fingertips through the widow’s peak of his black hair. At another point, his lip-curling sneer melted into a dry chuckle.

A Space Marine’s cognition was a thing of transhuman processes. When Ulatal had shown the text to Perdita, it had taken her almost an hour to read it all. Sevatarion finished reviewing it in less than six minutes.

The warrior didn’t give back the data-slate once he was done with it. He locked eyes with Ulatal from across the chamber’s low table. ‘You’re looking at me as though you expect me to kill you.’

Ulatal gave a cautious smile. ‘The thought had crossed my mind.’

Sevatarion kept his eyes on the human as he nodded down at the data-slate still in his hand. ‘Because of this?’

*Careful, careful.*

‘With all due respect, lord…’

‘“Sevatar” is fine, in this circumstance. Leave the “lord” elsewhere, please. I am not a king.’

‘With respect… Your reputation isn’t one of patience and mercy.’

Sevatar stared back at him, unblinking, unmoving. A servitor would have shown more emotion.

‘I feel that’s an unfair judgement of my character,’ the warrior said, perfectly calm. ‘Your words grieve me. I’m deeply aggrieved.’

Silence reigned. *Is… is he joking? Is this a jest?*

Ulatal cleared his throat and drew breath to speak, but Sevatar interrupted him. ‘There is hardly enough information here to be worth butchering you over. This is only a fraction of the story.’

Ulatal leaned forward, feeling the looseness inside his chest and guts

squirm in ways he'd rather not have considered. 'I came for the truth, first captain.'

Sevatar met his gaze without blinking. He stared: judging, considering. 'You chase revelation with the fire of fever in your eyes, Orthos Ulatal. But such flames char a man's soul.'

'This is my duty. That's all there is to it.'

Sevatar's lip curled in some flavour of amused disgust. 'Is it indeed. I saw the gun-picter footage of your crash, by the way. The impact should have killed you three times over. You're a lucky man.'

Praise was the last thing he had expected. 'I… thank you, first captain.'

'Although you look like you were sewn back together with body parts from half a dozen men. Were you an attractive fellow before the crash, Ulatal?'

The officer hesitated again. He could feel this confrontation slipping through his fingers. He opted to stick with truth over false modesty.

'Yes, sir. I was.'

Sevatar tilted his head, fluid and animal in his movement. The Space Marine studied the human as if trying to see the man Ulatal had been in the wreckage he'd become.

'Well, at least they scraped you out of the cockpit, even if they left your looks behind.'

Ulatal said nothing. Holding a conversation with the first captain of the VIII Legion was like trying to ward off an approaching grain thresher with nothing but prayer.

'Well?' Sevatar prompted. 'You said you wished to speak to someone present for the Devastation of Zoah.' The Night Lord knocked his knuckles lightly against his breastplate. 'I was there. So speak.'

Ulatal cleared his throat. 'I don't know if I should file these reports. The Thousand Sons cast our Legion in a… negative light.'

Sevatar still hadn't relinquished the data-slate. 'That they do,' he agreed. 'Though it would hardly be the first report to do so. Who filed this miserable poetry?'

'An officer listed as "Khayon of the Khenetai", who belongs to something called "The Order of the Jackal". He's cited as captain of the warship *Tlaloc.*'

Sevatar shrugged, the barest movement of his shoulders. 'Never heard of him. I couldn't tell you if he was there or not. I paid little attention to the

Thousand Sons junior officers at Zoah. They all tended to whine in the same way. They blurred in my memory after a while.'

He paused, reflecting for a moment. '"Order of the Jackal". "Khenetai". What amusing titles the other Legions use.'

*A strange insult,* Ulatal thought, *from a man known as the Prince of Crows.*

Sevatar's stare was sudden and bestial. Not aggressive, but undeniably animal. Something that might almost pass for a smile infected its way across those scarred lips, inch by inch.

*He hears me.* Ulatal felt an icy prickle along his spine. *Emperor's blood, he can hear me.*

But the Night Lord said nothing, did nothing, beyond gesturing for him to continue.

'I can't file the final report in this form,' said Ulatal. 'It's judgemental, melancholic and reads like propaganda. And there's the risk to morale, as well. First, I need to confirm the report's veracity. After that, I can gather counterpoints that balance its biased tone.'

Sevatar blinked at last, and his imitation of a smile faded. 'Here is what you may do. You may file this report as it is, leaving it in the archives for future generations to regard as a mild and anomalous curiosity. Or you can delete it, and no one will know or care. If you do either of those actions, you will leave these quarters, and then leave the *Nightfall*, returning to what remains of your life. You will never fly a Fury fighter again, but your mind is not broken. Only your body. You will almost certainly be promoted for your service, either to a frigate's command crew or to the rank of group captain overseeing a carrier vessel's fighter squadrons. Is that a good life? A bad life? I do not know. My standards are my own, and yours are yours. So humour me as we paint more of this grand picture. You will rise high, yes, of that I have no doubt. Yet you will always piss into medicae bags. You will always taste blood when you eat, from your false teeth and your ruptured insides. You will always labour to breathe with the single shredded lung that remains in your chest. Even if you are granted more vat-grown organs and accept cybernetic grafts, you will heal, but never really recover. Your body was destroyed in that crash, Orthos. You know that. I see the knowledge in your eyes. I may have no gift for reading human emotion, but I promise you, I read truth and lies as easily as other men read the words of a book.'

Ulatal exhaled slowly. He said nothing, nothing at all.

The Night Lord reached for one of his belt pouches and drew forth a fist-sized orb of polished brass. Ulatal raised an eyebrow at the sight of the antiquated holo-projector as Sevatar rested it in the centre of the low table between them. The warrior rose with purring armour joints as he spoke once more.

'You can leave and live that life, Ulatal. Or you can watch this, and get the answers you've come for. Contained within are no vital records that will benefit the Great Crusade, no damning truths that will threaten either of the two Legions involved. Just the words of two brothers at odds. Words that neither brother wishes those outside their Legions to know. This…' he tapped the activation rune with his thumb but didn't push it down, '…is a matter for legionaries and primarchs. A family matter. Not something for mortal eyes and ears, and certainly not the Crusade's archives.'

'Then why offer it to me?'

Sevatar chuckled. 'Why indeed.' His tone made it rhetorical. 'Farewell, wing commander.'

Ulatal watched as Sevatar reclaimed the immense war spear. 'This recording, first captain. If I watch it…'

The Night Lord fixed his black eyes upon Ulatal's uplifted gaze. 'Are you asking if you will forfeit your life by learning the truth?'

Ulatal nodded. Sevatar did not.

'Let me ask you something, Orthos Ulatal. If you were to die tonight… would you really care?'

The spire at the heart of the city was fashioned from an igneous blue stone quarried only on Zoah's easternmost landmass. Acknowledged by Zoah's population as the wonder of their world, it was a dizzying feat of architecture that pierced the clouds – a monument to mankind's hard work and its capacity to create beauty.

Sevatar looked at the tower, his targeting reticule dancing here and there, tracking for structural weaknesses. Its beauty didn't figure into his thoughts, nor did the idea that other people would find it beautiful. His mind didn't work that way.

In the parlance of Zoah's native culture, the building was called the *Ivil'kuuh*, translating into Gothic as the Tower of Serenity. The translation was inexact, for serenity in the Zoahn culture implied not peaceful

enlightenment, but a condescending sense of *noblesse oblige* of an educated elite over the ignorant masses.

He knew this because he'd read it in the mission datafeeds, and studying the operational data was what a good soldier had to do. Context was vital in a warzone.

'It's beautiful, isn't it?' Shang's voice was a crackling purr across the vox.

*I don't know,* thought Sevatar. *How do you tell if something is beautiful?*

'Yes,' he said aloud, because he suspected that's what he was supposed to be thinking. 'Truly a marvel.'

'It will be a shame to pull it down,' Shang added.

'The law is the law,' Sevatar replied with the instinct of repetition. Shang's reply was a grunt of agreement.

Sevatar looked at the tower's base, and the targeting crosshairs on his retinal display flashed across several far more tempting targets. The Thousand Sons ringing the tower stood in ordered ranks, bolters and blades clutched at parade rest. They waited – no, they stood guard – and the only thing that would change that fact would be the words of the primarchs currently in orbit.

Sometimes the Thousand Sons' efforts were visible, sometimes they weren't. Every now and again, Sevatar saw a shimmer of the telekinetic barrier in the air. Each time, the tower wavered like a mirage behind the invisible wall of force that kept it unharmed.

The Night Lords first captain crunched over the broken rock of the conquered city, boots grinding down on the dusty gravel of destroyed homes. He approached the nearest Thousand Sons officer – a dark-skinned man clad in the red and gold of his Legion, his eyes ringed with weariness and an artistic curl of kohl.

'Ahzek,' he hailed the warrior.

'Captain Sevatarion.' The Thousand Sons legionary gave a Nostraman hand gesture of greeting, palm open and out to show no violent intent, and Sevatar smiled at the courtesy because smiling was something people were supposed to do.

'Has there been word?'

Ahzek Ahriman shook his head. 'None.'

Both warriors looked across their opposing ranks of men. Where the Thousand Sons stood in defiant vigil, as rigid as automatons, the Night Lords were grouped in loose flame-unit teams, speaking amongst

themselves and eyeing the tower's defenders with a naked revulsion that curdled their white faces.

The stalemate had stood for three hours so far. Packs of Night Lords occasionally spread apart so pairs of warriors could duel – over abused honour, avenging insults or mere boredom. The Thousand Sons allowed themselves no such laxity in discipline.

'Is it worth all this?' Sevatar asked, nodding to the opposing forces. In the last hour, battle tanks had been drawn up on both sides.

This close to the tower, he could feel the telekinetic barrier prickling at his skin. A maddening and unscratchable itch, a pressure that seeped inside his skull and expanded to plump up his brainflesh. He clenched his teeth and swallowed the desire to vomit. For a moment, he thought he could hear the chanting murmurs of the Thousand Sons over the other Legion's vox-links. They sounded ghostly, foreign, unbearably tired.

'Yes,' Ahriman replied. 'The Emperor would weep if we allowed this knowledge to be destroyed.'

Sevatar exhaled through closed teeth. Other people's delusions were such tiresome processes to deal with. 'If that were the case, my primarch would not be ordering us to burn it all to ash.'

There was patience in Ahriman's expression – patience and sympathy. 'With the greatest respect, Captain Sevatarion, you speak in ignorance. We have sailed the tides of the Great Ocean in ways no other Legion can imagine, let alone comprehend. The lore within this tower pertains to the realm behind the Veil, and only we are qualified to judge its worth. The Crimson King's word is the only decree with any weight here. We will take this lore to Prospero and then, once it has been studied, we will take it on to Terra.'

Sevatar managed to unclench his jaw. 'You have a way of treating brother-warriors like children, you know. The sugary treacle in your tone does not hide the fact you are a patronising Terran shithead.'

Ahriman shook his head a second time, patient in the face of this tirade. 'It is not my intention to mock you, Jago.'

Sevatar's features twitched. 'I am returning to orbit to see if our fathers are any closer to reaching a conclusion.'

'I will accompany you,' Ahriman replied, 'but I would like your assurance that your forces will not open fire on the tower once we leave.'

'But I've brought up all this artillery.' Sevatar swept a hand across the

ruined city, where a battalion of VIII Legion armour rattled and growled on idling engines. ‘It would be such a shame not to use it.’

‘I mean it. I want your word.’

Sevatar stared at his counterpart. ‘If I gave you that assurance, you would actually believe me. Wouldn’t you?’

‘I would hope you would keep your word,’ said Ahriman.

Sevatar snorted, not in mockery but honest surprise. ‘No one as naive as you has any right to be patronising, Ahzek.’

‘Knowledge is neither good nor evil, brother. It gains morality only in its use. If used with malice in mind, it becomes evil. If used to benefit others, it becomes good.’

The two brothers had been speaking for some time, and it showed on their faces. The first of them was a red-skinned giant, armoured in Tizcan bronze and Prosperine gold, both metals possessing the very barest suggestion of scarlet in their metallic hues. Flowing sigils decorated the armour plating in patterns of arcane tracery. Where the giant’s right eye should have been, a clenched slit marred the aristocratic beauty of his features. Of the eye that had once nestled within the closed socket, only speculation remained.

The second brother was rangy where his kinsman was muscled, ragged where the other was grand, with skin the white of unclean ice and hair the dirty black of chiropteran wings. He sat while the other stood tall.

This second brother looked down at his own gauntleted hands. He deployed and retracted a pair of great metal claws, over and over, with nasty hisses of adamantium grating against ceramite.

‘The law is the law,’ said the pale brother. He didn’t look up from his gauntlets. Twin metallic slashes accompanied the deployment of his claws again, flashing from their housings on his forearms.

At the chamber’s edges, several Space Marine warriors stood in silent vigil. Names and faces and helmets that were renowned across the emergent Imperium: each one a hero in his own right. Such a gathering would, in better circumstances, spell the annihilation or subjugation of a culture resistant to Imperial compliance. Now these worthies stood quietly, watching their fathers fight over the right to deliver the final blow to the world below, or to spare it from oblivion.

One of the warriors clad in midnight war-plate, a man as morbidly pale as his primarch, with a blade-scar across his lips, shook his head as he spoke

up at last.

‘Please spare us your moral relativism, uncle.’

Several of the Thousand Sons, resplendent in their crimson plate, stiffened at the warrior’s words. Magnus narrowed his left eye as he gazed upon his brother, refusing to look at the Night Lord that had spoken.

‘If your sons cannot keep from childish outbursts, brother, perhaps it’s best if they leave us.’

The ragged primarch retracted his claws once more. The sigh that ghosted through his sharp teeth was weighted by weariness. He said nothing. His posture of tired defiance spoke for him.

Micromovements among the Thousand Sons officers betrayed them as they voxed to one another on private channels while standing at attention. The Night Lords commanders opposite them stood at ease, not bothering to mirror their counterparts. Ahriman, first captain of the XV Legion, held his staff straight as he stood at attention: a transhuman avatar of statuesque perfection.

His dark reflection across the room, Sevatar, was leaning on his chainglaive. It was impossible for a transhuman warrior-murderer to look insouciant, but the first captain of the Night Lords came close.

‘We should–’ Sevatar began.

‘Silence,’ both primarchs said at once. And wonder of wonders, it worked. Sevatar went back to staring at Ahriman, perhaps wondering how skilled the other Legion commander was with his trinket-laden staff. Ahriman, in contrast, ignored Sevatar entirely. His focus was on the conversation unfolding in the centre of the chamber.

Magnus the Red knelt before his brother, eye to eye. His voice softened. ‘Pull your men back from the tower, Konrad. You think me too proud to compromise? I am not. Not over a matter so vital, for knowledge so critical. Give me two weeks to comb the depths of this trove, to separate the truth from the harmful lies. I will destroy anything that bears the stain of deceit, myself.’

The claws slashed free. They slid back into their vambrace housings. They slashed back out again.

‘Do not do this,’ Magnus pressed. ‘Do not commit this lore to flame.’

Konrad Curze lifted his dark eyes to meet his brother’s halved gaze. ‘I will brook no compromise. I will give no ground. The library will burn.’

‘Brother.’ Magnus’ voice was a strangled plea. ‘Let me send word to our

father first. Let his word be the judgement we seek. He would never wish this library destroyed, I promise you. And I will remain with you while we wait. Neither I, nor my sons, will enter the Tower of Serenity until the Emperor sends his blessing.'

'How confident you are,' the Night Haunter replied. He had gone back to looking down at his hands. The claws slashed out yet again.

'I am,' Magnus confessed, passion giving heart to his tone. 'I am, brother. For decades even before my rediscovery and Prospero's welcome into the Imperium, I spoke with father across the tides of the Great Ocean. Mind to mind, soul to soul.'

'Soul.' Curze's chuckle was the rasp of a saw blade across bone. '*Soul*. You talk such pretty nonsense, brother. Spirits and tutelaries and Great Oceans and *souls*.'

Magnus rose to his feet. Gold flashed as he turned away in regret.

Curze's anaemic visage settled into a miserable mask of indulgence. 'Do you believe you are the only one to have spoken with father? That you alone know his wishes and his secrets, and what he desires us to achieve out here? Tell me truly, Magnus – do you honestly think we are all nothing but fools, capering in your shadow?'

The Crimson King's features hardened, as did his voice. 'I speak of revelation and vision, and you speak petty words of bitterness. Brother, I'd hoped for so much more. Was your hunger to destroy not sated with the massacres you inflicted upon the people of this world?'

'Massacres,' Curze murmured the words, 'that you did not stop. Massacres that spared ninety per cent of this world's population and reached compliance in half the time Guilliman had estimated. So do not object to my "massacres", and do not speak the word as if it were some filthy sin.'

Magnus would not be cowed. 'The campaign was yours to prosecute as you saw fit. But this library, this lore…'

'That word again. *Lore*. You clutch at it, investing it with preciousness, holding it out before you as a talisman. What will you do with this *lore*, Magnus? Take it back to Prospero? Set it free for all to learn and know, believing you enrich their lives?'

Magnus said nothing at first. He looked upon his brother, feeling the cold creep of unwelcome revelation.

'Such hate,' he said, almost in disbelief. 'Such depths of selfish hate.'

Curze grunted beneath that gaze, looking back down at his gauntlets. The

claws retracted once more, then flashed free yet again.

‘It isn’t spite that binds me to this course of action,’ the Night Lords primarch said softly. ‘The knowledge in that spire is the crown jewel of a corrupt culture. Their beliefs should be destroyed to aid compliance and prevent a backslide into heathenism. Obedience is what matters, Magnus. They will be taught to obey. Through obedience, they will become Imperial.’

‘No, Konrad.’ Sensing a chance for unity, Magnus matched his tone to his brother’s. ‘You may be right about the people of this world, but not the knowledge they’ve accrued. Let me take it to the Emperor. That’s all I ask.’

‘I’ve already told you. I will brook no compromise. I will give no ground. Drop the kine shield around the Tower of Serenity, for if your warriors seek to maintain the barrier once bombardment begins, I can’t promise they will remain unharmed.’

‘You wouldn’t,’ Magnus sighed. ‘Even your murderous clan wouldn’t open fire on their own brothers.’

Curze looked up at his brother, his expression much the same as Sevatar’s had been when the first captains spoke on the surface of Zoah.

‘All you prove,’ Curze said, ‘is how little you know me. Sevatar, give the order to open fire.’

Magnus’ remaining eye widened. He reached out a hand. ‘Brother–’

‘This is Sevatar,’ the Night Lord spoke across the vox network. ‘Open fire on the tower. Bring it down.’

‘Brother!’ Magnus called, then… ceased. He tensed, wincing as he felt the impacts begin on the psychic shield his sons had raised around their treasure. Several of the Thousand Sons present grunted and staggered in psionic sympathy.

Curze’s claws retracted and deployed in the momentary silence. ‘When the Emperor came to my world, he brought light to Nostramo, a world that had never seen the sun. He brought the light of *knowledge*, Magnus. Suddenly, my people could see the wider galaxy around them. They could perceive other worlds and other cultures, city after city that didn’t dwell in the endless dark. Civilisations of peace and laughter. That knowledge didn’t free them, brother. It shackled them. It wrapped them in misery. Nostramo heaves with their sorrow, that the cost of their peace is fear and blackness. My people suffer in my absence. Law breaks down as they fight their bindings. And why? Because of knowledge. Because a well-meaning

teacher brought a perspective they weren't yet ready to know.'

Magnus' features were tight with concentration. Even so, he shook his head, his voice breathy with realisation.

'You are a hateful, blind creature. The Emperor will hear of this.'

Curze didn't gloat. He didn't even smile. 'How long can you hold that barrier for, Magnus?'

'Forever, if I wish it.' Now it was Magnus speaking through clenched teeth. 'Forever and a day.'

Curze still didn't smile, though did his eyes glint with cold mirth? It seemed, to at least one observer, that they did.

'And how long before your legionaries begin to wear out from exhaustion? How long before accidents occur, and all of those detonating shells kill your sons on the ground? A day? A week? A month? I have the ammunition. Or I could pull my warriors back, and open fire with the *Nightfall*. How long would you keep your Thousand Sons on the surface then? This only ends one way, Magnus. My way. I would rather you stood with me, and prevented bloodshed. Your men don't deserve to die for their misguided optimism.'

Magnus nodded, the gesture one of acceptance if not agreement. 'I will remember this, Konrad. I promise you, I will remember this.'

'Good,' said Curze. 'Lessons should be remembered. That is why they are taught in the first place.'

'Ah.' Now Magnus smiled. His regal features were a poor foundation for malice, but there was nothing warm in that smile. 'A lesson, is it? Bold words, from a man that just claimed ignorance was bliss.'

Curze's jaw tightened; the most emotion he'd shown thus far. 'I will hold fire for thirty minutes. Get your Legion off the ground. The tower falls in half an hour.'

The claws slashed out once again, and Curze's image flickered with distortion. Magnus' did the same. The walls of the chamber blurred with static, and…

…and Ulatal stared at the space where the two demigods had been a moment before. The hololithic recording faded away, and the device on the table still clicked as it cooled. Ulatal felt the stillness of his assigned quarters as a physical caress against his skin.

'I fear Magnus was right,' he said to himself.

‘Perhaps he was,’ Sevatar allowed. Ulatal jerked at realising he wasn’t alone, and his reknitted bones throbbed with the sudden motion.

Sevatar was standing in the doorway, his spear in his hand. Ulatal resisted a groan at the fresh wave of pain flowing through him, from moving after remaining still for so long.

He hadn’t heard Sevatar return. Now the bulkhead stood open.

‘Why?’ he asked the warrior. ‘Why did you do it?’

‘You are a military man. You know the weight of classified information, and the many reasons such data is withheld.’

‘The Great Crusade is grander than that, though.’ Ulatal heard the naïve optimism in his own voice, but it didn’t shame him. ‘It’s about… hope. Enlightenment. Truth.’

‘Some minds are not equipped to deal with the truth.’ Sevatar walked into the room, his boots thudding on the floor. With the butt of his spear, he casually pushed the door closed. It sealed with a mechanical crunch. ‘Perhaps both primarchs were right, or both were wrong. It hardly matters.’

‘How can the truth not matter?’

‘Ah, the *truth* matters,’ said Sevatar. He looked reflective for a moment. It wasn’t an expression that looked at home on his features. ‘But what is true is not the same as who is right or wrong. The tower fell. We burned everything we found inside to ash and cinder, and then we shelled the spire until it was naught but dust. That is the truth. That is what matters.’

He looked down at the human, black eyes unblinking. ‘You learned what you came to learn. Was the recording enlightening?’

Ulatal nodded. ‘It was.’ He smiled suddenly, a rare expression aboard the *Nightfall*. ‘I’ve never seen demigods argue before.’

‘Yes, it has entertaining elements,’ Sevatar admitted. ‘We are told it would be awful for morale if it ever became common knowledge, however. Primarchs must not be seen to be at odds with one another. The Crusade’s mandate is strict on these matters. I doubt most humans would care about or understand the gravity of the argument, but I did not write the codes of conduct. I merely enforce them. Sit still, please.’

‘Why?’

Sevatar raised his chainglaive. His armour joints growled in chorus. The chain-teeth stayed inactive; they would rend flesh easily enough without the warrior needing to gun the weapon’s trigger.

‘This is why.’

Ulatal set his jaw and refused to close his eyes. He stared up at his killer, awaiting the blur of movement that would herald the end.

‘*Sevatar.*’

Sevatar stood motionless.

‘*Sevatar.*’ The voice crackled from the vox-link in the first captain’s collar.

The warrior remained unmoving. ‘What is it, Shang?’

‘*The cripple*,’ came the vox-voice. ‘*We’ve received word that he has been assigned to the* Voidmaw *as group captain.*’

Sevatar, with his spear still raised high, looked down at the man he was about to kill. ‘Is that a rank and role you wish to claim?’

Ulatal didn’t move, not even to nod or shake his head. He honestly didn’t know what he was going to say until he drew a shaking breath, and spoke.

*OceanofPDF.com*

# THE EMPEROR'S ARCHITECT

Guy Haley

*OceanofPDF.com*

There were dreams the Emperor had for all of mankind.

They were not the same dreams that his subjects had.

Olivier suffered through his least favourite nightmare. He looked on as iron giants slaughtered crowds of faceless people, whose abstracted forms suggested they were not human. They were angular, with pointed feet and hands, as if they were models folded from sheets of paper. But they were people. Their screams and their blood left no doubt of that.

Olivier was recording the event. How many paper people killed here, how many artfully slaughtered there. He wrote as fast as he could. For some ridiculous reason his pen was an antiquated quill, an actual feather, rather than the autoscribe he used in the course of his work. Paper spilled in an endless spool from his lap. He tried to record all he saw, racing across the paper to capture every nuance of the massacre. He couldn’t. It was impossible, but he couldn’t stop. There was something menacing behind him. Its disapproval of his work hung over him. Olivier sobbed; his handwriting became an illegible scrawl, he wrote so fast the pen split and his hand ached, but he could not get down what the presence desired. The paper people died in their droves, bludgeoned apart by steel fists. Their blood ran like ink.

The thing came closer. It meant him harm.

‘Look at it – isn’t it beautiful!’

He couldn’t get it all down!

‘Olivier, wake up!’

Olivier came awake with a jerk and a gasp. His wife’s bland expression greeted him, her mild eyes expressing query.

‘Are you all right?’ she asked.

Olivier wiped sweat from his face. ‘I’m fine. I’m fine.’

‘Nightmares?’

‘I said I was fine, Marissa,’ he said sharply.

She looked at him strangely. He didn’t think she knew how much he had come to resent her, though he had tried his best to show her. That annoyed him too. Everything about her annoyed him.

‘Look,’ she said. ‘We have arrived.’ She pointed out of the viewport by their seats.

They were man and wife, Marissa and Olivier, bonded under his patronym of LeBon thirty long years ago. Life had been good to them. They were of high social class, better fed and cared for than the common man of the Imperium. Their status was such that even the transit yacht carrying them from voidship to world was luxurious.

Through armourglass dulled by the impacts of interplanetary dust, a planet was visible. Reflected light glowed from myriad lakes and snow caps. There was nothing that could be called an ocean. The almost contiguous landmass that covered the majority of the surface was predominantly green-brown and wrinkled all over with mountain ranges. If a planet were a human face, this one was an old woman. Olivier and Marissa had travelled to dozens of worlds. He had become inoculated against the marvels of planetary approach. Repetition rendered the wondrous banal.

Marissa retained her joy. Her childish wonder irritated her husband. Another thankless task awaited them on the surface, another pointless runaround trying to achieve the impossible, engaging with beings who did not care what they were trying to do. Olivier was sick of it all. But Marissa got more evangelical about their work with every frustrating assignment.

It was a great honour, that’s what the Order of Remembrancers had told Olivier when he and Marissa were given their role. They weren’t married then, and Olivier had believed his masters.

Biographers to the primarchs. There were a select few of their kind given

that title. They had accepted proudly. After four decades of chasing demigods who did not want to speak with him, Olivier saw the pride of his younger self as hubris. He had wasted his life.

Marissa never lost her enthusiasm.

‘Olympia!’ she said with breathless awe. ‘Home world of Perturabo, primarch of the Iron Warriors. See Olivier, it is a beautiful world. Beautiful.’

‘Yes,’ he said without conviction. ‘Beautiful.’

For Marissa, a near holy duty drew closer. For Olivier, a punishment.

She kissed her aquila pendant when she thought he wasn’t looking. The ship began its descent.

‘The Emperor protects,’ she whispered.

Consciousness builds in the developing brain scrap by scrap. Imagine the accretion disk around a star. Through time and gravity’s influence a planet is born. Who could foresee the dust would make a world? The line between dust and planet is ill-defined. At what point does one state become another? When do the cells of a developing foetus change from a collection of individual living things into an aggregate that functions as an organ? At what moment does a new heart take its first beat? When do chemical reactions in a warm pool cease to be driven by external factors, and instead become self-perpetuating? When does chemistry become life? What is the line between each stage; what moment is the boundary to the instant before; what marks the boundary to the instant after? There are self-evident moments where something is one thing or another. But what of the moments between? How can these liminal stages be defined?

Such thoughts as these floated without anchor. One day they would inhabit the exceptional mind of a being who approached the divine. Just then, they were scraps drawn to other scraps, making from themselves something greater, like a world from dust, or a child from cells, or life from elemental broth.

So is consciousness born.

Outside the being’s body was only warm dark, and the mechanical rhythms of an artificial womb. There had been voices, and a presence that touched and moulded, but they were gone.

In the process of transition between two states, can the object changing be said to be either of the discrete objects it will be and has been? How many

states exist between? An infinite shading, or infinitesimally small slices of differing existence?

The being felt the slow, greedy tug of a giant object so massive it bent space time around itself.

Gravity, thought the being. Gravity exerts influence. Influence effects change.

There was a shifting in the being's centre of mass. A shaking and a bouncing around the core of itself. The intrusion of outside stimuli defined for the being the shape of its body, and he knew that he was male. Before, he had not been aware of having a body at all. Now he was: four limbs, a torso, a head. Smooth skin felt vibrations through liquid and the heat it conveyed from beyond.

The being had considered all these things to be a part of himself. The increase of stimuli prompted him to divide himself from other things. Body, liquid, shell. That was his universe. The shell thrummed with stress harmonics. The liquid moved in sluggish tides.

High density alloy, he thought of the shell. He recognised its strength. He felt the same strength in himself.

Acceleration pressed him upwards. Articles that were not part of his body but which interfaced with it tugged at him. He was apart from his casing, but he was integrated with it, he realised.

He also realised, I am falling.

Sound returned as a dull rumble. Then a greater heat. Gravity pulled at him, acceleration pushed. A gaseous medium objected to his passage through it.

Atmosphere, he thought. Planet.

The descent lasted minutes, until terminating violently. The impact of his arrival boomed through his confined world. Light poured in through rents in his casing. The liquid that warmed and protected him rushed out.

Coughing violently, he discovered he had lungs.

In his few minutes of consciousness, the casing had gone from being part of him, to a protective externality, to a trap. Its dying machines wailed out their myriad malfunctions. The being ripped at the slippery tubes penetrating his skin, and fought his way free through the metal.

Cold air chilled him. White light blinded him. His body was as exceptional as his gathering mind, and rapidly adjusted itself to the change in environment.

He looked upon a rugged landscape.

Stone, he thought. Sedimentary formation. Mountain. Tectonic upheaval. Sky. Planetary atmospheric envelope. He knew the names and nature of all things as he experienced them, as if a parent whispered the words in his ear the moment he set eyes upon them.

He rolled onto his back. Steam rose from his naked body. His casing, his conveyance, his womb, stood upright on the mountainside bleeding oily fluids. The silver skin was blackened, and yet the large numeral 'IV' stencilled on the side was still visible.

The being lay on the cold hard stone and stared at the machine.

*What am I?* thought the being. *Am I this number? Am I… four?*

He was not a number. He was adamant. He had a name. It came to him unbidden.

He clenched fists slick with amniotic gels, and stood on legs never used before.

'I am Perturabo,' he announced to the mountains.

Predictably, the primarch was not at Olympia.

Vox communications with the traffic control towers were confusing. They continued to be so long after their craft had landed. It transpired that they had arrived at the worst possible time; Dammekos, the Imperial governor and Perturabo's father, was recently dead, and the state was in upheaval. How they had managed not to hear this before landing was moot. The effects on their mission were disastrous. Olivier assumed Perturabo's adoptive sister, Calliphone, would inherit the office, but Olympian politics were anything but simple, and the LeBons were caught in the midst of ferocious disputes.

They sent data bursts containing all their documentation three times to three different authorities. Conversations devolved readily into arguments. Eventually, a representative of the Legion was called for. Their discussion with this human servant was terse, and promised nothing.

They were kept waiting for several hours. That was always how it began. They were never expected.

The LeBons stayed with their ship. Transit to and from orbit was necessarily controlled on most civilised planets, especially on Legion worlds. Under the circumstances, it was possible they might not be able to leave the space port. On the other hand, if they tried, the authorities might

just let them disappear into the cities, where they would become someone else's problem. While they were at the port, they were a thorn, and thorns were rarely left in situ. So they stayed and remained an intentional irritation.

'Someone will come to get rid of us,' he said. There was no need to say it; it was what had happened many times before. Marissa had once respected him for his wiliness, until association with the Legions made all his qualities appear too anaemic. Men cannot compete with gods.

I am a small man, he thought, and I am too tired to grow further.

They waited at the foot of the voidship's single ramp. Gases burst from vents as the engines cooled. It was early evening, and the clouds of pollution coming off the space port were brown in the last of the light. A pale blue band of sky to the west backed silhouettes of mountains with sheared-off peaks. To the east, stars struggled out through the brume.

All space ports had similarities. They had open plains of hard standing divided into landing fields and aprons. They housed all kinds of craft. Short range vessels like theirs were nearly always grouped with surface to orbit lighters and purely atmospheric vehicles away from the serious business of transportation. Elsewhere giant lifters, troop ships and cargo haulers, bigger than buildings, crowded the artificial plains. Too big, really, to fit into the human mind. Their existence was undeniable, but the idea that they might fly brought on Olivier's vertigo. Like the mountains ringing the port, the ships seemed part of the landscape, not conveyances.

Space ports differed in the detail, most notably in what had been done to the landscape in order to accommodate them. The Dammekos Space Port was particularly dramatic. Olympia had virtually no flat land, so a mountain range had been cleared to provide it. Mountains were levelled, and their rubble used to fill the valleys between. Two peaks had survived in altered form, carved into gigantic statues of Legiones Astartes standing guard at the entrance to the space port.

'He's over-compensating.' Olivier nodded towards the colossi. They were marvellously realised, set in action poses full of motion and dynamism. 'Hundreds of millions of tonnes of stone balanced so they do not fall. And look, they are fortifications as well as adornments. Cannons for eyes. How quaint,' he said.

Marissa took exception to his sarcasm in her aggravatingly serene way. 'They are amazing artworks.'

‘Are they? Doesn’t it look to you like he’s trying too hard?’

‘You should have a little more respect,’ she said.

You have too much, he thought.

‘Be cheerful. We have a new book to write, a new adventure!’ she said. ‘Think of all we’re going to learn about Perturabo. We shall write the official history of his life. There is no greater honour than that.’

I don’t want that honour any more, he thought. ‘This is not what I imagined spending my life doing,’ he said instead.

‘You should be glad. Do you remember Fulgrim?’

Olivier nodded. ‘He was the only one that spared us an adequate amount of time.’

‘He understood why this is so important,’ said Marissa. ‘It could happen again.’

He glanced at her. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘Then tell me what you think, my dear husband. You tell me so little these days.’ Was that a flash of annoyance with him? He hoped so; it excused his own petulance.

Olivier took a sharp, nasal breath. ‘Fulgrim was vain. He was too eager to tell us how marvellous he was. Like a child, showing off all his precious things.’

‘You can’t liken the primarchs to children!’ she said.

But they are children, he thought. He remembered Fulgrim’s preening self-satisfaction. For all his supposed perfection he had seemed desperate they see it too, and praise him. He was superficial. Olivier became distant as he remembered the meeting.

His moments of distance occurred more and more often.

‘Are you listening to me?’ she asked.

Often he answered her mentally. To reveal what he truly thought would lead to argument. He forgot that no one but him heard his internal remarks. He had left her waiting again. He supposed he must have looked rude.

‘Olivier!’

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I’m tired.’

‘You’re irritable!’ Marissa laughed. The noise grated. ‘My husband, you cannot have it both ways. You are annoyed when our subjects are unforthcoming. You are annoyed when they speak with us. You must have liked some of them.’

‘I liked Vulkan. He was no nonsense. Right-headed.’

‘We had barely an hour with him.’

‘It was enough,’ he said. Maybe it wasn’t sufficient to write an accurate book – though when had they ever written one of those? – but it was more than sufficient for Olivier. He couldn’t have survived another five minutes under the regard of those burning red eyes. Vulkan was otherwise a ponderous fellow, overly serious.

‘What of Dorn? Did you like him?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘How could you like any of them? The primarchs might be awesome beings, but they are awful people.’

‘They are not there to be liked.’

‘What are they for then? To be worshipped?’ he said harshly.

She looked stung. That had bitten close to home.

‘Olivier, I do not know what misery has hold of you. We have had a marvellous life. We have collaborated on five of these books.’

Five tomes of half-baked supposition, he thought, arduous yet fruitless research and tedious speculation presented as fact. Lorgar had refused point blank to see them. Leman Russ hadn’t even allowed them to set foot on Fenris. He didn’t have it in him to be involved with a sixth.

‘And though some have been hard,’ she went on, ‘we have met with some of the most marvellous people in the galaxy, perhaps ever to have lived.’

She took his hand. He tried not to flinch. He did not like her touching him any longer.

‘Surely you can be happy with that?’ she said.

Happy? He thought. Happy to spend my life presented to beings who could crush me without a thought. Beings who speak with us only as an indulgence. Beings who you, my once dear wife, worship?

He felt inadequate. What man can judge his own achievements well when set against those of the primarchs? The statues at the space port were a case in point. Olivier could never do anything like that. The Lord of Iron’s abilities were on another plane altogether. Was it any surprise at all that these gods would not speak with them? He and Marissa were ants before them.

Marissa squeezed his hand. He glanced at her. Her skin was loose. Her eyes were lost within the folds around them. She had been beautiful once. He had loved her then.

‘You are happy, aren’t you?’

He hadn’t been happy for a long time. He made an equivocal noise. She

seemed satisfied with that.

‘Look,’ he said. He used the distraction as an excuse to extricate his hand. He pointed. ‘A Land Speeder in the Legion colours. Someone’s coming for us.’

The shepherds were pursuing Perturabo when the jalpida came upon them. In the shepherds Perturabo saw echoes of himself, but he was different to them. He knew that even then. He thought about it while he jogged ahead of them.

They knew nothing about him. They only wanted to kill the strange feral boy whose teeth were reddened with the blood of their flocks, and whose limbs were clad in stolen skins.

He outpaced them easily, springing up the sheer slopes as easily as the caprids he poached. His agility seemed to worry them. His superior eyes could read their tiny faces from far away. They were afraid, but they still came after him. He admired that.

His pursuers were falling behind when Perturabo heard the first screams. He continued on, heading ever upwards towards the reaches where the shepherds could not easily go. Sure of sanctuary in the cold, thin air, he grinned. The screams grew quieter the further up he went.

He was about to reach a ridge that would hide him from sight, when he hesitated. The cries of the shepherds were getting desperate.

He turned back to look.

Down the slope, the shepherds were under attack by a feathered serpent fifteen metres long. Its body was thick, coming up to the human waist. Its fanged maw was wide enough to swallow a man whole. The mouth was closed protectively around a bundle. Its neck was distended. Curious, Perturabo waited until the snake swung around so he could see what it had, and glimpsed the head and shoulders of a boy protruding from the mouth. He was being drawn inch by inch down into the snake’s gullet and would soon be swallowed. The other shepherds beat the snake with sticks and stabbed hopelessly at it with their long knives. They were agitated, upset. The serpent would not release the boy.

Why did they not retreat? The creature had its meal. It would not give it up, and while it had the boy, it would not eat them. They had no weapons that could hurt it, but continued their fruitless attacks regardless, putting themselves in harm’s way. It was illogical.

Perturabo intended to go. To his surprise he found he, too, wished to stop the beast and save the boy. He wondered at this instinct to go to the shepherds' aid. He began to descend, then stopped. His rapidly maturing brain calculated the likelihood of victory. He did not find the result to his liking.

The serpent rippled, putting on a startling turn of speed and outpacing the shepherds. The brush of its hide knocked the men down, and it was away over the rocks.

One shepherd wailed louder than the rest as the beast carried off its prize. He caught sight of the young primarch, and cried out in a language Perturabo had never learned, but which he understood.

'Help us!' he wailed. 'Help us!'

Perturabo's half-formed mind judged the shepherd. Was he weak, or was he deserving of help?

He thought on this for a full minute.

Perturabo turned away, and headed back for the ridge.

The LeBons' liaison was a giant slab of genetically altered meat encased in armour, and in that he was a typical example of the Emperor's enhanced warriors. His face was squat and bullish to the point of inhumanity, with a neck so thick his head appeared to be an extension of his shoulders, and a brow that looked borrowed from Olympia's cliffs. Olivier had assumed that spending time with the Legions would make their members easier to distinguish, but he had found the contrary to be true. He had given up trying to see the differences between them, and had come to rely on the markings they wore on their battleplate.

This one was called Krashkalix. He was a sub-captain of the IV Legion.

Krashkalix opted to sit with them in the Speeder's cramped transport compartment.

'I apologise that you were kept waiting, and that the primarch is not here.' Krashkalix was forced to shout over the teeth-rattling thrum of gravity impellers holding the vehicle aloft. The mountainous terrain made for shocking turbulence, and the machine bounced through it. 'He was called away to the Sak'Trada deeps several months ago. The Great Crusade waits for no one.'

'We understand,' Marissa shouted back. 'We meet with the primarchs if we can, but we understand their duty to the Emperor supersedes all other

considerations.’

This satisfied Krashkalix. ‘As it should.’

Olivier disagreed, but could have left it there. He did not.

‘Our lives are a constant chase after your genefathers,’ he said. ‘They are never where they are supposed to be, and if they are, they never have time for us.’

He’s going to frown, thought Olivier to himself. Space Marines often frowned. Their capacity for expression was severely limited.

Krashkalix frowned.

There we go, thought Olivier. He gained a sort of weary satisfaction from being right.

‘We are, in short,’ Olivier continued before the Space Marine’s inevitable objection to his words, ‘frequently disappointed.’

‘I am sorry, but we fight for the Imperium, for the whole future of mankind,’ said Krashkalix.

‘There’s a war on?’ offered Olivier.

‘You mock me,’ said the Space Marine stolidly. ‘I understand you too have your duties to perform. You were not forgotten. Perturabo himself ordered me to meet with you as soon as you arrived. He regrets he cannot speak with you personally. Truthfully. You come at a difficult time. The satrap Dammekos died not a month ago. There have been problems establishing who should take his place as governor. We Iron Warriors are few here. We prefer not to become involved in politics, yet we have no choice. The situation is tense.’

The news that they had not been forgotten made Olivier think of the statues, and of Fulgrim. Another vain one then, he decided.

‘You are right that we all have our duties to perform,’ said Olivier. ‘If conquering the galaxy seems hard, then ours is merely impossible.’

‘Regrettably the future of mankind must have priority over the past,’ said Krashkalix. ‘Maintaining stability in the present is task enough.’

Olivier shrugged. ‘If you say so.’

‘I apologise for my husband.’

Krashkalix looked at them both. ‘You are pair bonded?’

‘It was inevitable, we spend so much time together.’ Marissa patted Olivier’s hand.

The Space Marine looked neither impressed nor disinterested, but kept his expression of bovine indifference.

‘I must disagree with you a little, sub-captain. The past is important,’ Marissa said, ‘because if we don’t know where we have come from, how can we value what we have?’

‘These are not the concerns of the Iron Warriors. We are conquerors. We erase pasts, but it is not my place to question the wisdom of the Emperor’s servants,’ said Krashkalix, though the way he said it suggested to Olivier that he clearly did question it. The LeBons were used to this, the unwilling babysitter spouting apologies and platitudes through gritted teeth. Olivier wondered if escorting remembrancers was a punishment detail. If it was, what had Krashkalix done?

‘As the primarch is not here, what do you wish to do?’ said Krashkalix. ‘If there is anything I can enable for you so that you might accomplish your task more quickly–’

And stop being a nuisance to me, Olivier added to himself.

‘–then you need but ask. You have the authority of the Sigillite himself. I am bound to obey.’

But I’m not happy about it, Olivier thought, adding the subtext.

‘Thank you, sub-captain,’ said Marissa brightly. ‘We’ll do what we usually do in these sorts of circumstances.’

To wit, every time we have written one of these damned books, thought Olivier.

‘We shall gather information and begin to compile notes for the biography,’ said Marissa. ‘The interview with the primarch can wait until his return. To begin with, it would be appropriate to visit places of importance from his youth. We have of course begun our research, but I find visiting the sites to be most useful.’

‘You do not wish to acquaint yourselves with recent information?’ asked the sub-captain.

‘We could speak with his family. I had hoped for an audience with Dammekos, but his sister still lives,’ said Olivier. ‘Perhaps she will speak with us?’

Again, the frown. ‘Relations between Governor-elect Calliphone and the Legion are currently poor. The royal family may not consent, and I cannot command them.’

‘Then we shall speak with them in good time. We will probably be here for several years,’ said Marissa.

‘That’s how long it usually takes,’ said Olivier offhandedly.

‘I am a linear thinker,’ continued Marissa. ‘I like to begin at the beginning. Sites from his youth to start with.’

‘Very well,’ said Krashkalix. ‘The Legion has arranged accommodation in Lochos. You may spend the evening refreshing yourselves, and regarding the many improvements my lord has made to the capital. Then tomorrow I shall take you to the place where my father first arrived on this world.’

Perturabo knew what he needed without being told. His growing mind was a library full of books he had yet to read. He had only to think on a matter and information welled up inside him. Sometimes it stayed only a short while before sinking back into the depths of his subconscious, but more of it remained within his grasp with every passing day. As his mind grew, so did his body. The raw skins he had taken no longer covered him, so he saw that he was getting larger. If he went back to it he would no longer fit within the vessel that had borne him to the world of mountains, caprids and men.

He smelt what he needed on the air, scenting it like a hound from kilometres away, a hard smell, rich with possibility. Fire, and metal.

For the first time, he descended past the treeline on the mountain, and headed for the green valleys where men dwelled in numbers.

He followed the smell into a village. A ringing sound beat out steadily as a heart. He zeroed in on it, clambering over walls, pushing his way through hedges, moving in a straight line towards his goal. A crowd of children playing in a field saw him first. He glowered at them, and they ran screaming.

By the time he reached the village, the alarm had gone up. It was a small place, twenty households of hard highland families set around a paved square on the round shoulder of the mountain. He found a road, and walked that, his bare feet planted firmly upon the uneven cobbles. There was a crowd in the square when he arrived. They did not dare stop him as he walked towards the forge.

The smith was engrossed in his work, and only looked up when Perturabo pushed his way within. The smithy was enclosed, a red and black world of secrets. The smith was a powerful man, thickly muscled and wise in his arts. Perturabo was as powerfully built as he. The smith knew not to protest.

Perturabo looked around, knowing the names of the tools and the items as he set eyes on them.

‘Give me iron. Give me charcoal. High grade, long burn. Give me tools.

Give me them now,’ he said. He extrapolated the words he must say from the limited exposure he had had to the shepherds’ speech. What left his mouth was tangled, but comprehensible. It was the first time he had ever spoken with another human being.

The blacksmith did as Perturabo asked. Authority cloaked the young primarch. Fear did the rest.

For hours Perturabo laboured in the forge, crafting an artefact he had never beheld, but whose shape was carried in his soul. The knowledge to work the metal, to beat iron into steel, to temper and to hone came to him as instinctively as the shape. In the beginning, the blacksmith held back, though he would not leave his domain. In the end, he came forward to assist. Those were superstitious times. The gods were prayed to and honoured, but never evident. Here was the proof of their being. Only an emissary of the gods could be so strange, and appear so mysteriously, and work the smith’s magic despite being so feral.

Perturabo allowed the smith to help.

The whole day passed before the work was done. At its conclusion Perturabo held up a plain, iron sword to his face and sighted along the edge. It was the first sword he had ever seen. He grunted in satisfaction, and turned to go. He had said nothing since his initial demands.

‘Who are you?’ asked the blacksmith in wonder.

Perturabo paused at the threshold of the smithy.

‘I am Perturabo,’ said the boy.

Outside, nervous men waited in silence, their useless weapons held in trembling hands. Perturabo walked by them, and they let him go.

The supposed site of Perturabo’s arrival at Olympia was a cold, wind-blasted place marked by a simple cairn of stones. Olivier wondered why there were not greater monuments there, because it had become abundantly clear that Perturabo liked monuments. There were monuments in Lochos, there were monuments on mountain tops. There were monuments at the sides of roads. Many of them depicted legionaries of the Iron Warriors, both as individual, helmless heroes and as faceless representations of the Legion as a whole. But there were just as many statues of Perturabo. Krashkalix proudly stated that many were the work of the primarch himself.

There was nothing so remarkable about the landing site.

The Speeder hung off the mountainside, engines buzzing noisily. One of

the many faces of the huge, blocky mountain garbed in ice that looked out of the Chaldicean uplands, the slope was a bare few degrees from qualifying as a cliff. There was nothing alive there. Olivier found it hard to breathe. No sign of human habitation was visible, not even the ubiquitous ancient mines and quarries that scarred Olympia. They had overflown many of them. What at first appeared to be natural formations turned out to be vast workings from the Dark Age of Technology. But not on that mountain. Perturabo had arrived in a pristine environment. It was cold, bleak and woeful to the human soul. Nobody could possibly go up there of their own volition.

‘What a sad place,’ Olivier muttered.

‘It was definitely here?’ asked Marissa.

Krashkalix looked discomfited. ‘Probable location. By the time the primarch returned to the site, his pod had been removed. Even so high as this, a prize like that would have been spotted and plundered. Olympia is without accessible deposits of many minerals, those having been mined out millennia ago.’

‘Could he not be sure?’ asked Olivier. ‘Most of the primarchs have prodigious memories.’

Again, Krashkalix offered a variation on a frown that expressed awkwardness. ‘As does my lord, but he does not remember much of his earliest days on this world. His memory begins with his climbing the Phrygean cliffs near Lochos. The legends of the Chaldicean mountain folk inform what we know of his earliest days. There was a falling star. A strange child was spotted in the mountains shortly after. He killed some of their livestock and was to be hunted, until he slew a jalpida and other local predators. After that they thought him a gift from the gods of the day, and he moved from village to village, crafting wonders and slaying the beasts that preyed on them.’

‘Gods no one believes in any more,’ said Olivier.

‘In accordance with the Imperial Truth,’ said Krashkalix. ‘No.’

Marissa made copious notes and set to work with her picter. Olivier couldn’t raise the interest. Naked stone and a probable landing zone provided few facts. He watched Marissa warily. She should know better than to attach any significance to this place. An avian cawed. Flying level with Olivier’s eyes only thirty metres away, there was over a kilometre of empty space beneath its belly. Looking down past the bird made his head

spin.

‘There’s not much to see here,’ said Olivier. ‘Let’s move on.’

Krashkalix nodded. ‘There is a commemorative museum not far from here. There is more for you there.’

‘Just a minute more!’ Marissa said. She bustled about, taking picts and making sketches.

Olivier waited impatiently while she finished. Krashkalix stared off over the distance-misted forests, lakes and rock of Olympia. He was not at all bothered by the cold.

‘The city was as impressive as you said,’ Olivier said to him. He was hoping to draw out Krashkalix a little. Architecture was not what he wished to learn about.

‘My lord Perturabo has many great talents. His wish, when this war is done, is to turn them over to peaceful matters.’

‘I heard some call him the Emperor’s Architect,’ said Olivier.

Krashkalix’s frown made a reappearance. ‘It is not his preferred title, nor is warsmith, warlord or siege master. None of them encompass the entirety of his skills.’

‘But he is a fine architect,’ said Olivier.

‘Yes.’

Olivier waited a moment. ‘I heard shouting, in the streets last night,’ he said.

Krashkalix turned to look at him and blinked slowly.

‘It sounded like a protest,’ Olivier went on.

‘There are elements in the populace who object to the demands of supplying the Legion,’ said Krashkalix. ‘They have become more vocal following the demise of Dammekos.’

‘I don’t see many young people here on Olympia. The city seemed somewhat empty.’

‘The Emperor’s wars take their toll on all worlds. Olympia is no exception,’ said Krashkalix.

‘What will be done with the protestors?’

‘They will be punished,’ said Krashkalix. He would not be drawn any further, and Olivier went back to slowly freezing to death.

By the time Marissa finished, he was shivering.

Over her wind-reddened cheeks, Marissa’s eyes were alight with possibilities. She was crafting Perturabo’s story already, weaving another

web of lies in her mind.

‘Where to next?’ she asked Krashkalix.

‘The forge of the first sword,’ he said. At the legionary’s command the Speeder drifted close enough to the rock face that they could step aboard.

Perturabo walked into the shepherds’ farmstead carrying the head of the serpent in his arms like an infant. A collection of crude huts and broken-down fencing, the farm made the village with the forge seem grand.

The primarch was covered in blood, and the sword swung naked at his hip. The shepherds had seen him coming. They waited inside, peering fearfully from glassless windows.

Perturabo threw the head down onto the dusty ground outside the main dwelling, and waited.

The door creaked open. A man came out. Perturabo thought he was the shepherd who had cried out for his aid. He could not be sure. His memories would not settle; they were in constant competition with the knowledge swimming around in his mind and were unseated by it before they could take root. The knowledge was an affliction as much as it was a gift. He hoped the shepherd was the right man. The head was for him.

The shepherd looked at the trophy.

‘You killed the jalpida.’

‘I did,’ said Perturabo.

‘You have taken seven of my flock.’

Perturabo stared at him impassively.

‘But this has taken far more,’ said the man. ‘And it took my son. You have avenged him.’

‘I have.’

‘What is the price?’

Perturabo frowned.

‘What do you want?’ said the shepherd. ‘For the service. Everything has a price.’

Perturabo’s quick mind analysed the shepherd’s speech patterns, refining his own command of the language as he spoke.

‘I do not want anything.’

The shepherd was confused. ‘Then why did you help us?’

Perturabo thought. ‘It was right. You are weak, I am strong.’

‘You have come to protect us.’ The man looked hopeful. It was a piteous

expression.

The young primarch stared at the shepherd, then gave a single, hesitant nod. ‘Yes. That is what I am for. To protect, and to improve.’

Another sentiment crossed the shepherd’s face. It was an expression Perturabo was to learn to despise in the coming years. All Olympians, no matter how humble, were skilled in exploiting situations to their advantage. If he had known that then, he would have turned and walked back into the high peaks and dealt no more with men.

‘We are poor,’ said the shepherd. ‘There are many beasts in these mountains that feast on our caprids. Some attack us and take our children, as you have seen. We cannot slay them. Can you?’

Perturabo waited. Encouraged by his silence, the man continued.

‘A hydraka lairs not far from here.’ He pointed to the north-west, where pinnacles of rock crowded out the sky. ‘Three valleys over, near an outcrop like a horned head. We dare not graze in that territory, as the hydraka kills everything. There are many good pastures there, but we cannot use them.’

‘It hurts you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then I will kill it,’ said Perturabo.

The shepherd looked almost regretful. Perhaps he did not expect such swift agreement; perhaps he had realised the strange boy might die on behalf of his greed. Whatever his misgivings, his attempts to dissuade Perturabo were half-hearted. ‘The hydraka are powerful, and cunning. They are like the jalpidae, but with many heads. You must cut quickly to destroy it, for they heal blade wounds fast. It will disarm you. It will kill you.’

‘It will not,’ said Perturabo certainly.

He left the village. That night, he feasted on jalpida flesh, not knowing it was poisonous to mortal men. It did him no harm.

The next day he set out towards the outcrop. As he made his way down the path from the high peaks where he slept, he found a bundle wedged under a rock. Curious, he opened it out, and discovered a suit of clothes like those the shepherds wore, cut for his muscular youth’s body. The workmanship was inadequate. Perturabo saw a myriad ways it could be bettered. He improved the suit before discarding his skins and donning it.

On the way to the valley of the hydraka, he stopped to cut himself a wooden club from the heartwood of a tree. The shepherd was right. The hydraka healed his sword cuts quickly, and it wrenched his blade from his

hand with a venomous mouth and cast it aside, but when Perturabo crushed three of its five skulls with his club it died just the same.

The heads he delivered to the same farmstead, and the next day more gifts were left out for him. Food, and utensils – a bowl, spoon, knives and more. He had none of these things before, but the moment he saw them he knew what they were and he recognised their work as inferior. He abandoned the gifts, and made his own.

A week later, a storm of rising knowledge dislodged his memories, and he forgot that any of this had happened.

Six months after that, he found himself clinging to the Phrygean cliffs, and his life began in earnest.

The Speeder took the LeBons to a small town high in the mountains. Modern buildings clinging to sheer rock defined the majority of its streets, but the centre was an unevenly paved square atop a knoll in the narrow space between where one cliff ended and another began. The square was old, and the buildings around it also, made of rough stone long before the Emperor had come to Olympia. A primitive smithy stood slightly away from the rest of the buildings. Smoke drifted from its chimney.

An idealised statue of Perturabo occupied the square's middle. Cast in gold, the primarch stood over an anvil, his smith's hammer raised to strike. The masonry of the statue pediment was flawless. The artistry was sublime. So much gold – on impoverished Olympia it was worth an incalculable amount.

In style and wealth, the monument was a ridiculous contrast to its surroundings.

A simple flap of hide divided the forge from the outside world. Krashkalix made straight for it and held the curtain open for the remembrancers. Heat washed out. A smith was at work within.

'In here,' said Krashkalix.

'A shrine?' said Olivier incredulously.

'A museum,' Krashkalix corrected him.

'It looks like a shrine to me,' said Olivier. 'We've seen this before, near worship of the Emperor's sons by their legionaries. We don't want that, we want the truth.'

'Hush, Olivier,' said Marissa.

'I will not be quiet when I see the Imperial Truth ignored.'

Krashkalix looked at the floor. The Legions did revere their genefathers. Olivier was convinced it would one day lead to trouble.

‘Worshipfulness is not why I brought you. You wanted to speak with people connected to the primarch. You wanted to speak with people who are honest.’

‘Yes,’ said Olivier. ‘We did.’ He looked around the small town. Like Lochos, it was underpopulated. The few people who had come out to see the strangers were old.

‘The resident smith is Gerademos, the grandson of Andos.’

‘Andos? As in, Perturabo’s foster-brother? What’s he doing here?’ asked Olivier in surprise.

‘Why don’t we ask him, dear husband?’ said Marissa, and went inside.

Olivier took a deep breath of cold air. Krashkalix stopped him before he could go in.

‘Be careful repeating what he says. Gerademos is not afraid to speak his mind. He speaks the truth, mostly, but it is an unfortunate version of the truth.’

‘And he is allowed to?’ said Olivier.

‘He is our gene-lord’s kin,’ said the Space Marine. ‘I said we prefer not to become involved in politics.’

Olivier followed his wife into the broiling interior. Krashkalix came last, stooping low to clear the lintel. The hide flap fell, cutting out the glare of the day and leaving them in ruddy dark.

The blacksmith was twisting wire around a bundle of iron rods to hold them together. Then he set a modern machine that worked a set of bellows going and thrust the bundle into the fire and spent a long time adjusting its position while it heated through. He ignored the LeBons and their escort for five minutes while he did this. Eventually, as Olivier’s patience was running out, he spoke.

‘I won’t speak with him here.’ The blacksmith didn’t look up from his work.

‘I’m sorry?’ said Olivier.

‘The legionary, he has to go. Whatever you want, I won’t talk with him in here.’

‘How do you know we want to talk? We could just be visiting. Surely you have visitors.’

‘Not many. Not as many as Perturabo would like.’ Gerademos pulled the

bundle, now glowing orange, from the fire and set it on his anvil. ‘The Speeder,’ he said. ‘There’re only a few Speeders about. And you have one of *them* escorting you. You’re off-worlders, high rankers. You want something all right. I won’t talk in front of him.’

Olivier looked at Krashkalix. The sub-captain employed the obligatory Legiones Astartes frown, nodded, and left.

‘I assume you’ve come here to talk about the primarch.’ With three taps to sight his aim, Gerademos began to beat the softened metal, his blows welding the iron bars into one piece.

‘Assumptions are unreliable,’ said Olivier. Marissa gave him a serene look. It was a rebuke nonetheless.

‘They take all the best,’ he said, between striking the metal. ‘Not only the boys for the Legion, but nearly all of the young. They take them for the fleet, and the shipyards and for the auxiliaries and they leave the dregs behind. But just because I haven’t been chosen does not qualify me as an idiot,’ said the smith. The metal sang under his attentions. ‘You’re here to talk about the primarch. You’re not the first.’

‘Then tell us about him,’ said Marissa.

‘Why should I? I have no love for Perturabo.’ He spoke openly, without fear. Gerademos pushed the iron back into the fire. Creaking leather pumped by gleaming technology breathed life into the coals, and the heat intensified. After a few moments, the smith took out the metal and recommenced the welding in silence.

Olivier looked over at Marissa. Her role in their partnership was to break down the barriers their subjects erected around themselves. It wasn’t something that had been assigned, but an easy practice they had fallen into during their long marriage. He enjoyed watching her talent at work. They still had that. There wasn’t much else.

Marissa moved around the cramped forge, looking at this or that, though never once touching. She stopped before a pile of what Olivier at first took to be scrap bronze, but when he looked closely, he saw that there were traces of magnificence clinging to it.

Marissa pointed at the mangled metal. ‘This must have been marvellous. Is this the work of your ancestor? What happened to it?’

‘That? That is not the work of my grandfather. Perturabo made it with his own hand.’ Steam whooshed around Gerademos as he plunged the metal into the quenching barrel. ‘And by his own hand he destroyed it.’

‘Why?’ asked Olivier.

Geradmos thrust the metal back into the fire. Cherry glow lit his face. Ruby coals reflected in his eyes as he leant against the sill of the coal bed. He was tense; he didn’t want them there. He turned around.

‘I tell you what. I will tell you of my ancestor, Andos, who grew up with the primarch, and lost everything to him. You can draw whatever conclusions from that you like. Then you’re leaving.’

‘Thank you,’ said Marissa warmly. ‘That seems fair.’

‘Andos was a noble man,’ Geradmos began. ‘He was kind and thoughtful – indeed, he was so different to the rest of Dammekos’ kin there were whispers he was a foreign seed sprouted in the poison soil of that house.’

‘Is it true?’ asked Olivier.

‘No. I myself have been gene-typed to settle the matter. Dammekos was my great-grandfather.’

‘Then you could be rich,’ said Olivier.

‘Rich?’ Geradmos smiled humourlessly. ‘I would have nothing to do with him. He was as bad as his foster-child,’ said the smith angrily. ‘Andos was a great craftsman. Were it not for Perturabo, he would have been the genius of this age. There was little art or craft he could not turn his hand to, nothing he could not make beautiful. None could surpass him, except Perturabo. Do you think Dammekos, his own father, saw that? He did not. Dammekos was bedazzled by Perturabo, and what service the foreign youth could do for him.’

Geradmos pulled out the iron and commenced working it with his hammer. Between ringing strikes he continued his story.

‘But Perturabo did see Andos’ worth, and it made him seethe. He goaded Andos constantly into competition, vying with him to see who could make the most marvellous art or fashion the finest weapon. Everyone knew Perturabo exceeded Andos in every way, none more so than Andos himself, but the mere possibility that anyone, even his own adoptive brother, could better Perturabo’s talents, stoked his rage. Perturabo always had an excess of rage. So Perturabo contested with Andos, and beat him, and contested with him again, and beat him, and each time he exulted in his triumph. It was pathetic, like a ten year-old crowing that he has outmatched his three year-old brother in the wrestling ring.’

‘This does not accord with the official accounts of his life,’ said Marissa.

A hard strike sent a fan of sparks from the iron. Gerademos held up the iron in his tongs and peered at it critically. It was taking on the shape of a sword. The metal cooled to a dull ruby, and he thrust it back into the coals. The bellows began their pumping once more.

‘Of course it doesn’t. Perturabo wrote the official accounts. Before the Emperor came, he presented a face to the world that he thought of as calm and commanding, but was in truth sullen. He hid his envies, though not all of his rages. This story was told to me by my father, who heard it from my grandfather. You want a true account of the primarch, you won’t get a better one than this.

‘One day, Perturabo challenged Andos yet again. By this time my grandfather’s patience had run out. He had come to middle-age, and had withdrawn to his workshops. He had no desire to prove anything to anyone, only to continue his business in the shadow of the Warlord of Lochos as best he could. Perturabo would not let him be. He pushed and pushed, demanding another matching of skill. Andos’ own temper was slow to kindle, but it finally caught as any man’s eventually will, and so he took Perturabo’s challenge. They were to make statues of Shashal of Drast – he’s one of our culture’s heroes,’ he said sourly. ‘Yet another bloody murdering tyrant. We have an addiction to them.

‘This time, Andos strove harder than he ever had before. He put all his talent into that statue. Perturabo finished well before, but Andos would not hurry. Weeks went by. Perturabo’s ego was soothed by what he thought of as another victory. That is, until Andos was done and the statues were set side by side, and unveiled.’

The smith took the metal from the fire, and began again to beat upon it, speaking between strikes.

‘Perturabo’s statue of Shashal was perfect in every way. There was not a single flaw. In composition it was arresting. As a depiction of the human form it was a marvel. Shashal looked like he might step down from his pedestal at any moment, that he would breathe and live as a revenant in bronze. The people of the court were moved to tears.’

‘So why did he destroy it?’ asked Marissa.

Gerademos snorted a bitter laugh. ‘Because there was a problem, and for Perturabo it was a very big problem.’ Gerademos’ hammer rang off the metal. ‘Andos’ statue was better. A lot better. Perturabo’s was technically perfect all right, but Andos somehow trapped the man’s soul in bronze.

When viewed from different angles, the statue revealed another facet of Shashal's character. Andos depicted pathos and tragedy. Through subtle means he told the story of Shashal's life in that one, single figure. Compared to Andos' statue, Perturabo's looked hollow. The way they tell it, there was never a finer piece of art made on Olympia, and Perturabo knew it. His face went grey. But he congratulated my grandfather, and the court gave Andos high honours. They were going to set the statues side by side above the Kephalon gate at Lochos in honour of both men. That never happened.'

'Because Perturabo destroyed them both,' said Marissa.

The hammer clanged again many times before Gerademos answered. 'You catch on quick,' he said. 'He obliterated Andos' statue completely. Of course, no one said anything about it. It went unremarked upon like all the rest of Perturabo's petty rages. His own statue he smashed into that mangle you see there, but he was careful to leave enough of it so that its artfulness can still be glimpsed. One of our noble lord's more subtle lessons for us. Andos and Perturabo never spoke again. Grandfather let himself age naturally, and died nearly ninety years ago. Such a waste of a talent, gone while his parasitic sister and father ruled over us.' He shook his head angrily. 'Andos had something Perturabo never had.'

'What is this thing?' asked Marissa.

Gerademos grunted. 'Humanity.'

The blade went into the fire for a minute. He repositioned it carefully, watched the way it absorbed the heat. Marissa waited while he worked, allowing him to calm.

'I have a final question for you, Gerademos,' she said.

'You want to know why I work here, when this place is so closely associated with the primarch?' he said. 'It's remote, for one thing. I'm freer to talk here than I am in the cities. Don't let the statue outside fool you – only off-worlders come here. The legionaries are always on campaign, and the rest of us Olympians don't care. I don't get many visitors, and I like it that way. This smithy was a human place, for human art. By working here, I reclaim it for our own kind. Perturabo's memory is a stain on this place. Perturabo protests he has the good interests of the people at heart, but he's insecure, paranoid as the worst of the satraps. Most here don't like him, but they respect him, and if they don't respect him, they fear him. I don't respect, fear or like the damn *kiritoi*,' he employed a strong Olympian

curse. ‘If I ever even begin to feel any of those things for him, I look at the remains of that statue in the corner there. It reminds me that it isn’t possible to make the perfect man. There’s always a flaw. Andos was the better man, because he was a man. No Emperor made him in a jar. Perturabo is a monster.’

He thrust the metal into the quenching barrel. Steam wreathed him. He pulled it out. The metal had taken on a gentle curve.

‘Ah, it’s a scythe, not a sword,’ said Olivier.

‘Why would I make a sword?’ said Gerademos. ‘Don’t you think we’ve had enough of war?’ He threw his hammer into a barrel of tools and picked up a whetstone. ‘Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got work to do.’ He turned from them, making it clear he would say no more.

‘Fascinating,’ said Olivier, as they passed the monument on the way back to the Speeder. ‘A great insight. I’m surprised he hasn’t been silenced speaking like that.’ He pitched his voice low to avoid drawing in Krashkalix, who walked several paces behind them.

‘Some worlds are more tolerant of dissent than others,’ said Marissa.

‘I don’t think this is one of those worlds,’ said Olivier. ‘There’s him, the protests we heard. Something’s going on here. Perhaps we could explore this story further, and get to the bottom of it?’ He glanced back at the Space Marine, but Krashkalix showed no sign of having heard.

‘No. That’s enough. We can’t include it,’ said Marissa.

‘We should,’ Olivier said coldly. ‘It’s the truth.’

‘Truth or not, you know we can’t,’ she said firmly.

‘I wish to show you what the Lord of Iron is to his sons.’

That was what Krashkalix said to them in the morning, before he flew them out of Lochos to a castella in the mountains.

Direct viewing of legionary helmet-feed usually brought on Olivier’s vertigo, so he took an anti-nausea pill before the immersion helm was placed over his head. The device was made for a legionary, and it took Krashkalix some effort to adjust the internal webbing and pad out the interior so that it fit.

A stream of numbers detailing date, time and location rushed past Olivier’s eyes, and he was plunged into the middle of ferocious battle. Despite being prepared for it, he jumped at the sudden noise.

The images had been captured by an Iron Warrior’s autosenses. Everything

the warrior had seen, Olivier now saw. It was like looking through another man's eyes. The pict-feed behind the Space Marine's visor had been used, and the footage captured the helm plate display as well as the tumult outside.

Energy bolts cracked past the legionary's helm. The view swung about wildly as the warrior pelted up a narrow corridor walled with seamless, rippled stone with the texture and shine of glass. The warrior threw himself into cover, raised his gun and snapped off four quick shots from his bolter. The image shook with the recoil. Multiple cannon turrets raked the way in return. Between the emplacements, Olivier caught sight of the Iron Warriors' foes: black-robed thralls, supported by cybernetic slave warriors toting energy cannons bonded to their shoulders. Line troopers bearing missile launchers came to the fore, unleashing rockets at the turrets and falling back. The guns disappeared in a cacophony of bangs. Smoke filled the corridor. Enemy fire petered out for a moment, and Olivier took a premature breath of relief.

A massive explosion shook the image. The view jerked all over the place. Olivier had a fleeting view of an airless sky beyond an armourglass roof as the legionary fell backwards. The warrior recovered quickly, and ran forward again, passing the broken, silver bodies of other Iron Warriors lying between piles of smoking stone-glass. The warrior's breathing rasped in Olivier's ears. An alarm beeped repetitively. Some part of the legionary's armour was damaged. The warrior muttered to his battleplate machine-spirit, rerouting power from one part to another, and the alarm ceased. He did all this while firing. He did not miss.

The focus and ability of the Legiones Astartes chilled Olivier every time he witnessed it.

The warrior kicked down a howling fanatic brandishing a warhammer equipped with multiple chainsword-like tooth tracks. Suddenly there were dozens of black-robed men everywhere, attacking suicidally. Olivier's host cut them down by the dozen. They were small, feeble as all men are compared to an armoured legionary, but their fervour carried them forward. Olivier saw an Iron Warrior fall, his armour cracked open by repeated blows of the fanatics. His host mowed them down with a burst of automatic fire. He turned back to see the whirring head of a bludgeon slam into his face.

The view fizzed. The pict-capture cut out.

Olivier drew a shaky breath, and reached up to remove the immersion

device.

‘Wait,’ said Krashkalix, his voice intruding into the blackness. ‘There is more.’

A new file began to play. Again, a set of data flicked on and off, too fast for Olivier to see, and another vision of combat burst into life.

A cyber slave reared up before the Space Marine. Olivier did not know if he was viewing the feed of the same warrior or if that Space Marine had died and this was another. The warrior’s opponent looked similar to the servitors used all over the Imperium, but its expression said it knew full well what had been done to it, and had been driven mad in the process. The technology attached to the man was sophisticated, although it had been integrated with his body without any care for his pain.

A blurring vibroblade attached to the cyber-slave’s hand cut across at the Iron Warrior. He dodged back and blasted out the chest of his foe. Blood sprayed all over the Space Marine and ran down his vision slit, staining the view. He fought on unhindered, putting down three more of the constructs.

Orders crackled in his ears, and he jogged onwards, falling into formation with other Iron Warriors. They ran through a brightly lit operating chamber. Its cleanliness only accentuated the cruelty of the instruments hanging over vivisection tables. Dead legionaries and cyber constructs lay upon the tiled floor in pools of blood.

They ran into a tunnel lined by murky glass suspension jars, where dismembered bodies floated and twitched. There was a moment of quiet, and then a tremendous screaming that cut out, and the sounds of battle once more boomed loudly as the ad hoc squad ran into a massive hall enclosed by a ribbed roof. Hundreds of the cyber slaves were arrayed there. Behind them were war machines, big as legionary Dreadnoughts and festooned with deadly weaponry.

‘The Black Judges,’ whispered Olivier. Stories of their reign of terror had reached as far as the Throneworld. Seeing them so close sent a shiver of fear through him.

Masses of Iron Warriors were engaged with the erstwhile masters of the Meratara cluster. Perturabo’s warriors had come in through the western walls, advancing up long halls, taking shelter from raking energy beams behind piles of their own dead. The casualties, Olivier had read, had been horrendous at every stage of the campaign.

For all their might, the Black Judges were losing.

At the centre was Perturabo, flanked by his Tyranthikos Terminators. Corposant and residual teleport mist still wisped from their armour. They had arrived only seconds before.

As Olivier's host ran into the room, Perturabo was concluding the slaying of one of the judges. He yanked his hand out from the smooth domed front of the vehicle, dragging an ancient human from the interior by the throat. Life support fluid burst from the rent Perturabo had pounded into the casing. Dead wires and tubes ripped from the man's body as Perturabo held him high and throttled the life from him. Lights flickered all over the war suit, and it collapsed to the ground.

Seeing one of their masters die, the cyberslaves went into a frenzied attack. Perturabo opened fire on them, shooting through the body of the dead Black Judge until the bloody tatters fell from his fist.

The primarch's wrist mounted cannons blasted swathes of death into the horde. The ammo feeds running from the back of the primarch's bespoke Terminator armour shook as they fed an endless stream of rounds into his guns, but Perturabo did not fire indiscriminately. He switched from target to target with preternatural speed, felling each foe with a single headshot at a rate too fast for the human eye to follow.

Olivier lost sight of Perturabo for a moment. A musical discharge of purple energy rocked the unnamed Space Marine sideways. A dead Iron Warrior wheeled overhead, black against violet lightning. The view righted, and the warrior ran on to his primarch, firing all the time until his weapon ran dry. He ejected a clip and snapped a fresh one home without breaking stride.

'Iron within, iron without!' the Space Marines shouted as they crashed, shoulder first, into the mass of horrors around the Lord of Iron.

The enemy was the stuff of nightmares, an anatomist's collection of flayed specimens brought back to screaming life. Skinless bodies served as carriages for heavy weaponry. Agonised eyes rolled, lidless in bleeding skulls. All of them were shrieking like the damned from some backward religion. Their suffering poisoned Olivier's soul. Over them loomed the giant war suits of the Black Judges themselves, the great monsters of popular legend, a living testimony to how far into evil humanity could fall. They differed in form to one another, but all were deadly. The weapons of the Dark Age of Technology were theirs to command.

A Terminator died to the blinding white stab of a neutron beam. The warrior whose feed Olivier watched reeled back, his helm alarms tripped by

radioactive backwash.

Perturabo crashed bodily into a Black Judge. The machines stood tall over their altered human slaves, but Perturabo was as big as they, and his shoulder barge sent his target staggering backwards. He opened fire with both of his wrist cannons, driving the machine further back. It staggered, stamping its own warriors into a paste as it struggled to remain on its feet. But the rounds could not penetrate its armoured skin, and its multiple weapons mounts swivelled to bear upon the primarch. Olivier knew all this was history – the campaign had taken place well over a century ago – but seeing it then was like living it, and he feared for the primarch's life.

A missile on a column of smoke slammed into the Black Judge's side, denting it. A second punched a neat round hole in the skin. A yellow flash preceded a gushing slurry of macerated flesh and life-support fluids that poured from the breach.

'The Havocs have arrived,' said Olivier's host. It was strange to hear his voice. He was calm, collected, even as he was slowly cooked by the ambient radiation around the Black Judges. 'Press forward. Iron within.'

'Iron without!'

Several insane cyber-constructs attacked Olivier's legionary. When the warrior looked again to his primarch, Perturabo was surrounded by the fiery blooms of missile explosions. Ruby las-blasts cut all around him, sectioning the air with a laser grid. Perturabo had pulled a giant hammer from his side. In one hand, he gripped the weapon arm of a war machine, the other swung his maul down hard into his assailant. The judge bore a bladed scourge that wrapped around Perturabo's arm, moving with a life of its own.

A searing light blasted Olivier's warrior to the side. His suit systems shorted out, dazzling Olivier with a confusing display of static and half-formed images.

Darkness fell again.

Krashkalix pulled the immersion helm from Olivier's head. Olivier blinked dazedly. The sight of Perturabo surrounded by violence as he brandished his hammer would not leave him. He looked to where Marissa sat, her own immersion helm in her lap. A look of holy joy suffused her. That, more than anything he had seen in the record, appalled him.

'If you were seeking to shock me, sub-captain, it won't work.' Olivier got shakily to his feet.

'That was not my intention,' said the Space Marine. 'I wished to show you

our lord as we know him, in the midst of battle.'

'He is no less daunting a figure to me now.'

An Iron Warriors serf brought Olivier a glass of water. He gulped it down greedily. His head ached from the helmet.

'Why should he be?' said Krashkalix. 'War is an awful thing. He was made to fight it.' He leaned forward. 'You seem less than respectful of my genefather. The Black Judges were evil men. They sucked the life from others to prolong their own. To do so, they held sway over this entire region of space, bringing their terror even as far as Olympia. In the mountains, the Lord of Iron slew serpents. In space, he toppled ancient evils – they were but the first of many. He works to do so now, against the hrud. Perturabo is no monster, but the slayer of monsters. He is your protector, remembrancer. You should honour him.'

Olivier gave Krashkalix a grave look. 'I shall be the judge of whom I should honour.'

Krashkalix stood up to his full height and glared at Olivier. The remembrancer regretted his poor choice of words.

'Tomorrow, we shall see more.'

Olivier felt he had seen quite enough already.

Olivier stood up from the floor and yawned. Documents describing every one of Perturabo's campaigns were heaped around their hospitium suite.

'He decimated his Legion. The way he makes war is so wasteful. He throws his men away.' He picked up a book and let it fall: Perturabo's *History of Olympia*. 'You have to wonder why he does it, why he revels in the image he has, this unbreakable, uncaring rock of a man. He's shoving his ruthlessness into people's faces.' He put his face into his hands and ground the heels of his palms into his eyes. 'He's stage-managed his entire life. There's no truth here, only the posturing of an egomaniac. It's no wonder the people are rioting. We should leave. We should go back to Terra, and tell the institute that we can't finish the book. This is the worst assignment yet.'

Marissa fell quiet. There were people in the streets again. Olivier heard them chanting in the distance. Their defiance was alluring.

'It doesn't matter.'

'What?' he said. He took his hands away from his eyes and looked up. Coloured spots danced in his vision.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ she repeated. ‘Fact is not the same as truth.’

‘You’re talking nonsense. We’ve had this out before. Why do you insist on coming back to this? We are here to write a history.’

‘Our job is to present the subjects as the heroes they are. No great general is without fault. Not one.’

‘What we write is the historical record!’ said Olivier. His temper was rising. ‘This is too important to fall prey to… to…’

‘Worship?’ she said. ‘The truth is more important than the facts,’ she said quietly.

Olivier’s tiredness retreated. Irritation drove it out. ‘That’s not biography, that’s hagiography.’

‘Maybe that is what the Imperium needs.’

‘The Imperium needs the facts,’ he said. ‘I won’t be part of myth making.’

She looked up at him. ‘Don’t you see, Olivier? The primarchs transcend the truth. They’re not people. Does the galaxy need to know the flaws in the Lord of Iron’s character? Can’t you see highlighting his shortcomings will undermine all that he has achieved? A book like you propose will never be published, and it shouldn’t be.’

‘That doesn’t matter!’ he said. ‘The truth matters.’

‘We don’t have the truth, Olivier. We don’t need it. We’re the keepers of modern legends. These books, these eighteen books, they’re the beginning of a new scripture.’ Her eyes gleamed. The double-headed eagle pendant was displayed openly on the outside of her dress.

‘Is that the real meaning of the Imperial Truth?’ he said scornfully. ‘Have you cast in your lot with the religious who whisper the Emperor is a god?’

‘The Emperor is a god,’ she said fervently.

‘I can’t believe you’re saying this.’ But he could; all the signs were there. He’d ignored them for far too long.

‘The Emperor Protects, Olivier,’ she said. Her mask of serenity had fallen, and she looked upset, desperate even. The chanting in the city was coming closer. It grew abruptly louder. The mob had turned a corner and was marching down their road.

He backed away from her. ‘He doesn’t. He can’t! Look at what’s happening outside, and answer honestly, has He protected people from Perturabo’s ego? When did you betray all we set out to do?’

‘What we set out to do betrays the Emperor. History isn’t important. Finding the transcendental truth is what matters. The… the purity of

vision… the quintessence of–’

‘Divinity?’ Olivier whispered.

They stared at each other, strangers at last. The noise grew louder and louder, passing under the windows of the hospitium. The protesters were shouting in Olympian. Olivier could read the language but had not yet mastered it, and he could not understand what they were saying.

The shrieking thrum of Legion jetbikes raced from one end of the street to the next. Olivier ducked in shock. The crowd howled in fear.

More jetbikes roared by on a level with the LeBons’ apartment, their passing shaking the windows. After came the noise of heavier aircraft engines labouring to land. Something big came very close to their accommodation. Their furniture vibrated across the floor. A lumen fell and shattered upon the parquet. If Olivier had anything to say to Marissa, he would not have been heard. He cowered. She stared at him without making any sign she was aware of the din outside.

The chanting on the street changed in tone. All semblance of words was lost. The crowd’s voice had become an inchoate roar under the scream of thrusters. Glass shattered somewhere nearby.

The engines cut out. A ramp clanged down.

Guns barked. People screamed. The thunderous drumming of thousands of people running together shook the hospitium. So many screams at once. Olivier crept to the edge of the blind and peered out of the side of the window, fearful of being seen. The mob had moved on, leaving placards and rubbish behind among bodies broken to pieces by mass-reactive rounds. Stragglers raced up the street. He couldn’t see the legionaries. A fire had started in the building opposite.

After years of cynical detachment, he felt a sudden roaring anger take hold of him.

‘This is what your legend brings you. Oppression, and rebellion,’ he gestured out of the window. ‘What will this mean for the people of Olympia? I cannot imagine Perturabo will be forgiving.’

Marissa was close to tears. ‘It is necessary. It is all for our good.’ She held up her amulet. ‘The Emperor protects! Please, Olivier, you have to see!’

He was disgusted with her. ‘It’s all a stupid dream,’ he said. ‘The Imperium, peace, all of it.’ He stared out at the deserted street. ‘All dreams end, Marissa.’ He sighed. A sense of enormous sadness threatened to drown him. ‘I cannot go where you are going.’ He let the blind drop. He couldn’t

look her in the face for fear he might strike her. He wondered what to do. Fury made the choice for him. ‘I’m leaving. I’d rather take my chances out there than wallow in your hypocrisy. Goodbye.’

‘Olivier!’ she called.

By then he had already walked out of their apartment door, and was heading down the marble stairs. He passed through the deserted lobby, and out onto the street. Smoke was rolling across the road. The dark shapes of powered-armoured legionaries advanced through it.

He ran from them, glancing behind him all the while, until almost by accident he joined the crowd as the Olympians rallied. At first he was scared, but he was swamped, subsumed within them. He could not escape, so he sank into their fury as if into a warm bath. Years of resentment boiled out of him, at Marissa, and the hollow promises of the Imperium. If it had just been her, a broken heart would have been the only cost. But it was not just her. Too many worlds laboured under the yoke of compliance, liberated from their past masters in name only, while the populace inched closer towards worshipful submission.

Olivier was swept along by the people of Lochos, up towards the shining palace that occupied the highest tier of the city’s topography. They spilled into the main square. More aircraft were coming into the city bounds, but they no longer landed unopposed. There was fighting in the streets. The snap-crackle of lasgun discharges responded to the booming of boltguns.

A woman came onto the balcony. Olivier supposed she must be Calliphone, the primarch’s sister. He expected her to speak calming words, to soothe the crowd and tell them to go home. Perhaps the Iron Warriors also expected her to defuse the situation, for they held back.

She did not.

She declared Olympia free.

A moment after she gave her blessing to rebellion, a cohort of Iron Warriors advanced into the square, and opened fire. Human soldiery in the uniform of Lochos responded from the buildings all around the public space. The Iron Warriors were massively outnumbered. Incredibly, it seemed to Olivier, they began to fall.

Caught in the crossfire the crowd ran again. Olivier fled with them, an animal desire to survive the only thought in his mind. He sprinted from the square as bodies exploded into scraps all around him, leaving the tatters of an impossible dream behind forever.

Marissa sat immobile, staring at the doorway her husband had left through. She was sure she would never see him again. The crowds were chanting louder than before, their anger echoing all through the warren of streets that made up Lochos. Firelight shone brightly across the road.

A sigh broke her inactivity. She got up, and opened a drawer to which only she had the key. With careful hands, she pulled out a cloth-wrapped bundle and laid it upon the table.

She spoke a short prayer for protection as she folded back the silk, revealing a book. She bowed her head in respect and opened the cover.

She read aloud from the *Lectitio Divinitatus* as the explosions of open revolt rocked the city

*OceanofPDF.com*

# THE ANCIENT AWAITS

Graham McNeill

*OceanofPDF.com*

Names had power.

Any novitiate of the Thousand Sons could tell you that.

To know something's name was to *understand* it, to have a window into the very heart of its being and see the workings of the machinery that underpinned it.

To pick the lock on a soul, you needed its name.

A name told you *everything*. The conventions of a name told you of the people who coined it. Etymological roots spoke to the historical circumstances of its origin, and each linguistic change that mutated it along the way told a unique story.

Names were *everything*.

Which was why Vistario's ignorance of this world's name so vexed him. The star chart Murshid had empathically drawn from the stagnant waters of the orrery retained no record of it, and the caustic winds blowing over the planet's irradiated plains only muttered the same imprecation that had drawn them to this barren rock in the first place.

'I can still hear it,' said Akhtar, a dusty gauntlet pressed to the faded Raptora icon at the side of his helmet.

'We all hear it,' snapped Murshid. Murshid was Athanaean; he heard the

planet’s lament most keenly.

He’d once likened walking the surface of dead worlds to stepping into a stream of liqnite and feeling the aching cold slowly seeping up through his flesh until his entire body was rigid. The gifts of the Great Ocean were manifold, but so too were their burdens.

Vistario’s fellowship had been Corvidae, back when the idea of fellowship had meant something. He’d learned his craft under the tutelage of Magistus Amon in his clockwork pyramid of brass, honing his ability to unweave the myriad threads of potential futures. His instincts for the truth of what might be were strong, but in the centuries since the retreat from Terra, the Corvidae had waned, now a shadow of its former glory.

The Great Ocean – always a treacherous mistress – had become a raging virago of psychic fury, the last breath of the Warmaster still echoing, centuries after his fall.

Yet even the mightiest oceans know ebbs and flows, and sometimes the veil obscuring the future would part, allowing brief glimpses into the endless, branching possibilities of the future.

One such glance had lodged in Vistario’s mind like a knapped shard of flint. A gleaming, reflective blade in which he saw this dead and nameless world, a hollow city and a plaintive message from a time already layered with mythic allegory, like a sunken wreck overtaken by the encrustation of deep-water denizens.

Vistario had dismissed the vision as meaningless, casting it from his mind to fly on the aether-winds of the Planet of the Sorcerers.

Just another fragment of unknown prophecy.

Useless.

Or so he had thought until the Crimson King appeared within his crystalline tower, ablaze with psychic might: a terrifying monster of ego and fury.

‘Go,’ Magnus commanded. ‘Heed this message. Find the messenger.’

*Heed this message*.

*Find the messenger.*

Two simple orders, yet to obey the primarch’s command was almost impossible. Following a fragmentary vision without context was like chasing a whisper of thought in an angry mob, a hundred echoes spreading from the source, each amplifying exponentially and mutating until all trace

of the original was obscured.

The three of them had left the Planet of the Sorcerers aboard the *Clavis Aurea*, a vessel so transformed by that world's chaotic nature as to be unrecognisable even to its original shipwrights.

Guided by Murshid's psychic map, Akhtar steered them through the roiling vastness of the Great Ocean with a seer stone torn from the ruins of the Reflecting Caves.

High in the Navigator's compartment, Vistario journeyed in the third enumeration, clinging to the gossamer-thin memory of his discarded vision. He replayed it over and over in his mind in search of some hitherto unseen clue as to its source, some echo that might point him towards greater understanding.

Vistario had lost track of how long they had searched.

Years, most likely, but who could know in a realm where time was the first of the universal 'constants' to be brushed aside?

He had despaired of ever seeing the vision again. Their quest was as futile as reading a message in a bottle washed upon the shores, writing a reply and casting it back into the waters in hope the original sender would read it.

But Magnus the Red had issued his command, and to fail in any task, even an impossible task, was to invite terrible retribution.

Better to stay away than return empty-handed.

Then, with hope all but lost… a miracle. The mob parted, the whisper became a shout and its source was revealed. A simple phrase: ambiguous, yet portentous.

*The Ancient awaits.*

Little remained of the city's soaring majesty, though Vistario imagined it had once been beautiful.

Its destroyers had been thorough. The ground still bore the scars of an orbital bombardment so ferocious it had pounded an entire substrate of the surface to ash and vitrified rock. Walking at ground level was like traversing a plateau of volcanic glass, and its outline had only been possible to discern from the air.

Vistario mag-locked his bolter to his thigh and bent to lift a delicate shard of wafer-thin glass shaped like the head of a spear. He turned it over in his hands, the lens of his helmet staring back at him from its reflective depths.

In the space of a breath the image changed.

Vistario dropped the shard and it shattered, breaking into an unnatural arrangement of pieces. He saw significance in the pattern, but a sudden wind scattered the pieces before he could divine its meaning.

‘What did you see?’ asked Murshid, bringing his bolter to his shoulder as he read the sudden change in Vistario’s aura.

‘I do not know,’ he replied. ‘It was a fleeting glimpse only.’

‘Of what?’ said Akhtar, traversing his weapon over the ruins.

‘A host of accusing eyes, as if reflected in a broken mirror.’

‘A vision of the future or an echo of the past?’ asked Murshid.

‘You know better than to ask that,’ said Vistario.

They pressed on, moving towards what he knew with a certainty he could not explain was the heart of the city. The rubble here was thicker, more deeply stacked – perhaps a king’s palace or some other grand civic structure.

‘Here,’ said Murshid, pausing by a heap of fallen granite blocks of polished pink, each with the suggestion of swirling carvings upon its outward face. ‘These were once part of a greater whole.’

‘Weren’t we all?’ muttered Akhtar.

‘Have a caution,’ said Vistario. ‘All whispers eventually return to the Planet of the Sorcerers. Did Ulthar’s fate teach you nothing?’

That silenced them all, the fate of the Athanaean splinter cult all too keen in their recollections.

‘Can you rebuild it?’ asked Murshid, turning his attention back to the blocks.

‘Easily,’ said Akhtar, eager to employ his powers. He rose into the seventh enumeration to lift the blocks, turning them over with brute psychic force and twisting them upon their axes until they slotted together like a three-dimensional puzzle.

The remnant of an archway was formed, seven metres tall and three wide, with knotwork carvings etched upon each cyclopean stone.

Vistario approached the towering arch and paused to examine the carvings. ‘They resemble musical notes.’

‘That is *exactly* what they are,’ said Murshid, his head tilted to the side as he followed their course with a finger in the air, like an orchestral conductor. ‘Every block is a song within a greater work, a choral symphony rendered in stone and sung by those who trod its byways.’

A series of jumbled impressions passed through Vistario’s mind at

Murshid's words. Of singers and war, of fire from the heavens: the final cacophony, the closing curtain of a drama…

'No, not the closing curtain,' he whispered. 'The *opening* act…'

His eyes were drawn by some strange volition to the cracked terrazzo of a once tiled thoroughfare, now revealed by the building of the archway. The tiles glistened with spots of gold in the wan sunlight of the dead world, and Vistario knelt to lift something.

'What do you have there?' said Akhtar.

Vistario turned the object over like a stage performer flipping a coin between his fingers.

It had once been a tapered cylinder, but had been pressed flat by the weight of the blocks. He saw now that it was not gold, but brass, its surfaces striated with heat and a faded mark that told of its origin.

Vistario stood and held out what he had found.

'That's a bolter shell,' said Murshid, reaching out to touch it, but thinking better of it at the last second as he saw the armourer's mark upon it.

Akhtar had no such reservations, and plucked the shell from Vistario's palm. He turned the round over and Vistario read the confusion in his aura as he too recognised the mark.

'World Eaters,' he said, uncomprehending.

The wind surged at his words, and once again they all heard it, a discordant, screeching psychic call. Stronger now, closer. They felt its grief, heard its fury, and most of all, they sensed its infinite patience.

*The Ancient awaits*.

Following the psychic scream to its source was not difficult.

The surface of the planet seemed now to open up before them and previously obscured pathways ran arrow-straight through the blasted landscape like the great Romanii roads of old. Patterns that had been invisible before were now undeniable, and the city's original plan became clearer with every step they took towards its heart.

Akhtar led the way like an eager bloodhound closing on its prey.

Murshid walked alongside Vistario.

'Akhtar's mind is blunt, but surely you must feel that we are not alone on this world?' he said.

'I have felt… something,' agreed Vistario. 'Can you identify it?'

'A powerful mind,' said Murshid. 'More than that I cannot say. Every time

I try to focus on its thoughts it slithers from my perceptions.’

‘We are seeking something desired by the Crimson King,’ said Vistario. ‘We should have expected we would not be the only ones in search of it.’

‘True, but anything that seeks to thwart the designs of Magnus the Red is not to be taken lightly.’

‘Do what you can,’ ordered Vistario.

‘I will, but whatever else has come to this world is not what concerns me most. It is that I believe who or whatever is sending out this howling missive is aware of us.’

‘Then it is not just me that feels we are being reeled in like a fish on a hook,’ said Vistario.

‘No,’ agreed Murshid. ‘It is not just you.’

The path led the three warriors of the Thousand Sons to a canyon-like gouge torn by something massive falling from the sky. It led to a blackened abyss, like the gate to some mythic underworld.

‘Not the best omen,’ said Murshid.

‘Did we expect anything else?’ replied Vistario. ‘But a trap is not a trap if the prey is aware of the hunter.’

Once again, Akhtar led the way.

The darkness within was absolute, but easily penetrated by the senses of their baroque war-plate. The rock of this world was glossy and molten, rippled by unimaginable heat. It plunged downwards at a steep angle until it emerged into a deep, vaulted space of soaring arches, high, fluted pillars and shattered chambers.

‘Catacombs?’ wondered Akhtar.

Vistario’s gaze followed the curve of a domed roof to where its structure had been ruptured. Dust drifted from above and thin spars of light speared into the darkness.

‘No,’ he said. ‘Parts were once open to the sky. This entire area was built both above and below ground.’

‘This was a city of secrets and lies,’ said Murshid, taking a knee and placing his hand on the ground. ‘One face presented, but it was a compliant mask. Its serpent face was hidden beneath.’

Whispers drifted on the wind, a thousand muttering voices just beyond the threshold of hearing. Vistario sensed their anger, watching with a wary eye as dust devils swirled in his peripheral vision. His footsteps stirred the

abrasive sands, and Vistario heard a scratching sound, as if he walked upon the ashen ghosts of this world's people.

*Who knows, perhaps I do*, he thought.

An angled roadway curved away into the darkness, and Vistario set off along it, picking a path through fallen rocks and skewed girders twisted by ferocious heat and pressure.

'The fury of the bombardment was absolute,' said Akhtar. 'That this place has survived is nothing short of a miracle.'

'No miracle,' said Vistario, pointing to where the stonework of the underground city revealed reinforced steel embedded within. 'This region of the city was designed to withstand attack.'

'The world above was built by human hands,' said Murshid. 'A pre-Crusade culture, if I read the echoes of Old Night correctly. Why would they build their world to withstand the fury of a Legion?'

'*That* is a mystery indeed,' said Vistario. 'Perhaps the one who has drawn us here can answer.'

The roadway passed through a set of armoured blast doors, and from that point onwards, the rough and damaged stone of the city above took on the utilitarian character of an industrial facility. Its walls were layered plascrete and flakboard, its ceilings reinforced vaults of latticed steel.

The walls were black, as though a firestorm had flash-burned through, and Vistario saw negative impressions on the wall where warriors had burned to death. The outlines were blurred by time, but disturbingly familiar.

'You see them too?' said Murshid, his voice wavering.

Vistario read the pain the Athanaean warrior was feeling.

'I do,' he said, the muscles in his jaw taut.

Deeper into the planet they travelled, along metal-decked passageways, down twisting screw-stairs and descending dormant embarkation elevator shafts. The presence they had felt on the surface lingered in Vistario's mind, like a distant pressure. Whatever it was, it remained beyond all their perceptions.

'This was some form of military launch facility,' said Akhtar.

'No,' said Vistario. 'It is too small for squadrons of attack craft.'

'I know,' snapped Akhtar. 'More like a hidden, private facility such as a planetary governor might construct.'

'Perhaps we are following the lost words of a long dead Imperial commander,' said Vistario. 'Ironic that it would be warriors he would

consider traitors who finally heed his call.’

‘Traitor?’ spat Akhtar. ‘We betrayed no one. *We* were the ones betrayed.’

Vistario raised a hand, as much to forestall any careless outburst from the Raptora adept as to call a halt to their long march.

‘We’re here,’ he said.

For all that the infrastructure around the launch facility had survived the bombardment, the hangar itself had not endured as well as its builders had expected. A small, orbit-capable starship sat at the far end of the hangar, its hull smashed open by falling debris and one swept-forward wing sheared from the fuselage by a fallen beam. A portion of the cave at the rear of the ship gleamed like glass, vitrified by the craft’s jetwash.

‘It was taking off when the roof collapsed,’ said Vistario. ‘Moments earlier and it might have escaped disaster.’

‘Whoever he was, he was abandoning his world to its doom,’ replied Akhtar. ‘He deserved to die with his world.’

‘We abandoned our world,’ pointed out Murshid.

Anger flared in Akhtar’s aura. ‘No, we were wrenched from it at the moment of its greatest need,’ he said. ‘The Crimson King denied us the chance to fight the Wolves and make them pay for their cowardly attack.’

‘We would have died,’ said Vistario.

‘Better that than this pitiful existence, brother,’ said Akhtar. ‘Sent scurrying through the shadows like errand boys for a master who broods only on his failures.’

Vistario rose into a more combative enumeration and fixed Akhtar with the steely gaze of one who has stared into the future.

‘Choose your next words carefully, *brother*,’ he said. ‘The fellowships may be broken, but what has been sundered may yet be renewed. You and I both read the prophecy of Temelucha.’

Akhtar snorted derisively. ‘The words of a madwoman.’

‘Since when have prophets *not* been driven mad by the things they have seen?’ pointed out Murshid, slapping a gauntleted palm on Vistario’s shoulder guards. ‘Our Corvidae brother hasn’t been sane since the retreat from Terra. We have dwelled so long in the Great Ocean that maybe we are all a little mad.’

The tension between Akhtar and Vistario drained.

‘Forgive me, brother,’ said Akhtar. ‘The fires of the great war may have

cooled, but mine still burn.’

Vistario nodded. ‘The *great* war may be spent, but the long war goes on. We are yet part of it and I believe the Crimson King has a plan for how it can be won.’

‘You really believe that?’ said Akhtar.

‘I have to,’ replied Vistario. ‘It is all I have left.’

Further discussion was ended by a clatter of stone from the front of the starship and a screech of twisting metal. All three of the Thousand Sons swung their bolters to their shoulders and rose into the war enumerations. Vistario stretched out his consciousness, searching for hostile minds.

And cried out as the force of an ancient mind skewered his brain with a lance of white hot power. He staggered as he felt patient hatred stab into him, its force so potent and singular that his secondary heart kicked in as the main organ ruptured.

‘Vistario!’ shouted Akhtar as his chest hiked with a sharp intake of breath.

Vistario raised a hand, switching from enumerations of war to ones of defence. Piece by piece he built his mental fortress, a citadel from which his mind could operate while protected from psychic attack. The cacophonous roar diminished, and he blinked the dazzling lights away from the insides of his eyes.

‘I am fine,’ he said, pushing himself to his feet.

‘What was that?’ said Murshid, getting up off his knees, a viscous fluid leaking from his gorget. As much as Vistario had staggered under the psychic force of the assault on their senses, Murshid would have felt it far worse.

Akhtar too, blunt as he was, had suffered. ‘That was no psyker.’

‘No,’ agreed Vistario. ‘Fourth enumeration. Advance.’

Dust and rubble fell from the roof of the cavern, dislodged by the force of the assault. An assault Vistario now realised had not just been psychic in nature, but sonic. Hideous aural trauma and dissonant harmonics combined to form a screeching howl that would have obliterated their hearing but for the cut-outs in their armour.

‘Careful, Vistario,’ said Murshid. ‘There is great hate here.’

Vistario nodded as he rounded a promontory of fallen rock and steel, his bolter tracking to the source of the psycho-sonic assault.

The prow of the craft had been split open in its abortive take-off, a six metre gash torn through to the pilot’s compartment.

At first he could not understand what he was seeing.

A host of cables trailed from the starship like a writhing colony of snakes. They were coupled with an outlandish device, the function of which Vistario could not even begin to guess.

But that was not the most surprising discovery.

Lying on its side, partially crushed by a giant spar of steel fallen from above was the shattered outline of a Dreadnought. Dust and ash lay thick on its adamantium sarcophagus, the colour of its armour all but obscured. One leg had been sheared from its body, and its left side was buckled inwards so deeply that the flesh within was surely dead. Its weapon arms, a Kheres-pattern assault cannon and a splay-clawed power fist were aimed skywards, as if this ancient hero of the Legions had sought to vent his fury towards the heavens with the last of his existence.

The Dreadnought lay upon something half buried in the rock of the cavern floor, its surface heat-burned and unrecognisable. More cables snaked from the wrecked starship and were hooked into the object's underside as well as to the war machine.

'A Dreadnought?' said Akhtar, lowering his weapon.

'Keep it covered,' snapped Vistario, edging forwards to better examine the strange device. It appeared to be a monstrous hybrid of musical instrument and an apparatus of excruciation designed by a sadistic lunatic. Its colours were faded now, but once it had been vividly painted and elaborately ornamented. It thrummed with energy, ripe with potential, and Vistario looked for a way to disconnect it.

An angry buzzing built as he reached to unhook the nearest cable, as if the machinery were alive and aware of his intent.

'Do. Not.'

Vistario flinched at the sound, a grating, wheezing vox-exhalation. He spun and brought his bolter up to aim at the not-so-dead-after-all Dreadnought. His finger tightened on the trigger, then eased off as he found himself staring down the multiple barrels of the Kheres assault cannon.

'You. Are. Not. Him,' said the Dreadnought.

Vistario slowly lowered his weapon, lifting his free hand away.

Murshid was held in the Dreadnought's fist, struggling in vain against strength that could tear open the hull of a Land Raider. Akhtar stood apart, his bolter trained unerringly on the Dreadnought's sarcophagus.

A gesture of defiance only. Even if the mass-reactive penetrated a weak

spot in the Dreadnought's body, Vistario and Murshid would be dead before Akhtar fired the first round.

'So. Long. I. Have…waited,' said the Dreadnought. 'Forgot. Name. Forgot brothers. Only hate endured. Only vengeance sustained me.'

The towering bio-machine's voice was redolent with power, its words halting at first, then growing in coherence, as if the very act of addressing the warriors before it was rekindling a memory of speech.

Soft light built within the cracked augmetic orb that was all that remained of the war machine's sensorium. Could it see him, and what would it make of his war-plate's colour…?

'What Legion are you?'

'Fifteenth,' said Vistario.

'The sons of Magnus the Red. The Cyclops. The Crimson King. Sorcerer Supreme, Master of Prospero. How fare the Fifteenth after so long? Tell me you did not fall into the same trap as my brothers. Tell me you endure and yet stand at our father's side.'

*He doesn't know*, thought Vistario. *All these years trapped below, and he doesn't know. How could he?*

'The Thousand Sons endure,' he said.

'I may be smashed and clinging to life, but I know evasion when I hear it.'

Vistario shrugged. 'You would not like the truth.'

'My like or dislike for the truth is immaterial,' said the Dreadnought. 'Truth is all we have. It is our shield against falsehoods. When facts can be twisted to become weapons, nothing good can endure. The Emperor taught me that, but too few of us took the lesson to heart or understood how vital it was.'

Vistario briefly considered pointing out the lie that lay at the heart of the Emperor's crusade, its corrosive effect like a poison pill slowly dissolving under the tongue. But he needed no Corvidae foresight to know the Dreadnought would kill him instantly for such an utterance.

'What is your name?' asked the Dreadnought.

'Malin Vistario, of the Corvidae Fellowship. What is yours?'

'I am… *he who remembers*,' said the Dreadnought. 'Or I used to be. An ancient mystic once said that it is the doom of men that they forget, but my memory is as broken now as my body. My purpose… I had one. It was to *know*. To remember. Examples of the past shape the present. Events of the future compel the past.'

Vistario was acutely aware of how precarious was his position. The Dreadnought was clearly insane, after the long centuries spent in isolation without Techmarines to minister the complex bio-mechanical cycles of his existence and maintain his fugue state of slumber.

'What were you to know?' he asked.

'To know what, you ask?' growled the Dreadnought in irritation. Shells clattered as rusted auto-loaders slammed them into the assault cannon. 'Does not the Fifteenth retain one whose task it is to *know*? To *see* everything! I once knew all the things that mattered – names, dates, places. Things of moment. The oaths taken. The oaths broken. The litanies of the faithless. I am he who remembers. I am the *Ancient of Rites*.'

A sudden flash of prescience swept through Vistario, and he craned his neck to look around the chamber, his mind's eye racing back the way they had come to the surface. He saw the war-wracked world above as the bombs fell from orbit, shattering the city and laying waste to those who defended it.

'I know this world's name,' he said, as its terrible legacy poured into him.

'Yes,' said the Dreadnought. 'Of course you do. Horus cut it into the heart of every legionary, whether they were there or not.'

'This is Isstvan III.'

'Yes.'

'And you…' said Vistario. 'You are–'

'I am Ancient Rylanor,' said the Dreadnought.

*Ancient Rylanor*.

Vistario knew the name. How could he not?

The tales spun around the betrayal at Isstvan III filled entire wings of the Gallery of Pergamum. This was where the canker at the heart of the Legions was first revealed, where the Legions had first spilled the blood of their brothers in open warfare. Magnus had despatched cabal after cabal seeking truths from those who had fought in that battle, desiring to unravel its root causes. It seemed to Vistario to be a thankless task, for every adept of the Corvidae knew that nothing ever *really* began. There could be no single moment from which this or any other event sprang; the threads could always be followed to some earlier moment and the actions that preceded them.

To attempt to pin any event's origin to a single moment in time would

drive a mind to insanity.

*Perhaps it already has*, thought Vistario, thinking of the desperate need he pretended not to see in his primarch's gaze.

Those who had fought through the virus-scoured hellscapes of Isstvan III described loyalist warriors of the World Eaters, Death Guard, Sons of Horus and Emperor's Children fighting for months against their brothers, enduring unimaginable horrors in the face of inevitable extinction.

The only mention of the Dreadnought's fate came from that most unreliable of narrators, Lucius the Swordsman, who claimed Saul Tarvitz spoke of an underground hangar the Dreadnought was rumoured to have found.

'Why did you not escape?' asked Vistario.

'I would have, but the seismic shockwaves of Isstvan's death went deeper and lasted longer than any could have foreseen. The roof of the cavern collapsed, trapping me here as you see.'

Vistario glanced at the strange device hooked to the interior of the wrecked starship.

'And what is that?'

'A sonic weapon of some kind. A handful of my former brothers found this place and sought to kill me. They failed, but the power of their weapons crippled me and left me as you see me now.'

'And you wrought it into, what? A distress beacon of some kind?'

The Dreadnought's vox-caster grated with what Vistario took to be a rueful chuckle.

'A distress beacon?' said Rylanor. 'No, a lure.'

'A lure for what?'

The sound of dead skin slipping over rock sent a chill down Vistario's spine.

A silken voice answered the Dreadnought's question.

***'For me,'*** it said. ***'Isn't that right, Rylanor?'***

Vistario's mouth fell open as a towering, serpentine shape emerged from the shadows of the cavern. Multi-limbed, sinuous and beautiful, ivory white hair spilled across the shocking purple of his sculpted war-plate.

'At last,' said Rylanor. 'Fulgrim.'

The primarch was an abomination, even by the standards of warriors who had seen their own father hideously changed by the transformative energies

of the Great Ocean. Vistario felt aether-fire pulsing within Fulgrim's body, his ability to manipulate its energies massively powerful yet unsubtle.

Swords glittered at his midsection, and his eyes roved the chamber, taking the measure of the presented tableau. How long had he been watching and listening? In the centuries since the Battle of Terra, the Phoenician's behaviour defied rational understanding or a sense of predictability. Magnus himself had given up any form of prognostication concerning his brother's actions, so how could Vistario even begin to predict what Fulgrim might do next?

***'Ancient,'*** said Fulgrim, sliding over the floor with grotesque, peristaltic motions. ***'You look terrible. A disgrace, even.'***

'What has become of you, my primarch…?' said Rylanor, his horrified disgust clear even through the degraded quality of his vox-caster. 'You are a monster.'

***'Says the scrap of ruined flesh maintained by grotesque machinery,'*** said Fulgrim, circling the four of them. His pale eyes were pearlescent orbs without pupils, soulless and devoid of anything that had once made him great. They regarded the warriors before him with only passing interest.

***'Why does Magnus send his broken sons to Isstvan III? Did you learn nothing from the Wolves' destruction of Prospero? My hermit brother should know by now that his meddlesome curiosity only leads to disaster.'***

Vistario fought to find his voice, always a problem in the face of a primarch. Doubly so in the presence of one so altered. Yet even though Fulgrim's appearance had changed so terribly, pangs of longing stirred in Vistario's breast.

'We heard his message,' he managed.

***'Too bad for you,'*** said Fulgrim with a grin, taking in their predicament. Murshid still hung like a limp fish in Rylanor's grip, Vistario was covered by the assault cannon, and Akhtar stood immobile, his weapon trained unerringly upon the Dreadnought's sarcophagus.

The Phoenician approached Rylanor.

***'So, old friend,'*** said Fulgrim. ***'You have my attention. What is it you want me to hear? And do try to make it diverting – after all, you've had millennia to perfect it.'***

Rylanor dropped Murshid and used the wheezing, grating limb to push its carapace upright. Vistario saw the muzzle of the assault cannon track away from him, following the primarch's movements.

He eased his mind into the warlike enumerations, letting the power of the Great Ocean into his flesh.

+Be ready,+ he sent to his brothers. A flash of thought only.

He felt their understanding, and flexed his psyche in readiness for wielding his powers. Conflicting visions pressed upon the meniscus of his mind: shredding bullets and mass-reactives, fire and an unstoppable tide of virulent destruction.

*The omens are not good*.

Dust and rubble fell from Rylanor's armour like sand in an hourglass. Fresh portions of the smashed object beneath the Dreadnought's body were revealed, and humming power cables ran from Rylanor's sarcophagus to an opened control panel.

Vistario felt his blood chill as he finally understood what it was.

***'Has it truly been millennia?'*** asked Rylanor, his voice stronger now, coming from a time long ago and filled with infinite sadness and patient regret.

'It has,' said Fulgrim, moving closer. 'Think of all that time wasted. All the glory unearned, all the victories denied.'

Rylanor gave another grating bark of laughter.

'Glory? You think I sought glory? How little you understood of your own Legion. Yes, I have indeed perfected what I wish you to hear,' said Rylanor as Fulgrim reached out to touch him. 'And though I am sure you will find it diverting, it will not be me that says it.'

Fulgrim's grin faltered as he too saw what the Dreadnought's body had obscured.

***'No,'*** he said, as if he thought he could stop what was about to happen with a word.

'Yes,' said Rylanor, sending an activating pulse of energy to the armed warhead of an unexploded virus bomb.

Vistario saw the moment of detonation a fraction of a second before it happened. Instantaneously, he beheld a vision of the explosive spread of the Life Eater virus as it consumed them, dissolving like frost before the sun. He saw their doomed bodies transformed into replicating flesh refineries in which the hyper-evolving viral strands mutated and found ever more inventive ways of destroying organic material.

All of this he witnessed in the space between life and death, the most

fleeting glimpse into an inevitable future.

But a fleeting glimpse was all an adept of the Corvidae needed.

+Akhtar!+

Already in the blunt, pugnacious enumerations, Akhtar was unleashing his power even as the detonation circuits of the virus bomb triggered. The casing shattered as the explosive heart of the bomb cracked open and the isolated viral compounds mixed in the precise amounts to catalyse the unstoppable reaction. Fire bloomed from the warhead in tortuous slow motion, lapping around Rylanor's sarcophagus like low-grade viscous promethium.

*+I cannot hold it for long!+* cried Akhtar, his Raptora powers stretched to their limits in holding back the explosion. Vistario reached out with his mind and poured his power into the warrior, feeling Murshid do the same.

Fulgrim laughed as the creeping death slid slowly over the Dreadnought's body.

***'Is this it?'*** he said. ***'You sought to draw me here to kill me?'***

Rylanor triggered his assault cannon, but – fast as quicksilver – Fulgrim caught it and crushed it before it could fire.

***'No, I don't think so,'*** said the primarch, effortlessly ripping the arm from the Dreadnought's body. Sparks flew from the ruptured limb and Fulgrim gave the weapon a dismissive glance before tossing it aside.

'You betrayed us,' bellowed Rylanor. 'Your sons! You led us here to die. There is no forgiveness for that. None! You must die by my hand! The Emperor's justice will fall upon you. Not even Fulgrim the Illuminator can escape the Life Eater.'

Fulgrim leaned in close to Rylanor and shook his head.

***'You wish me dead?'*** he said, scathing pity dripping from every syllable. ***'Why? Because you think I betrayed you? The Legion? Oh, Rylanor, your thoughts are so narrow. If you could only see us now, how beautiful we have become. We shine so brightly, each of us a brilliant sun.'***

Fulgrim reached down, sliding his bare hand inside a rent torn in the Dreadnought's armour. He smiled, closing his eyes and letting his tongue slip across his lips as he pushed deeper inside.

***'Ah, there you are,'*** said Fulgrim, as Rylanor's vox-caster grated in fury. ***'Wet and wriggling. I can feel your panic. It's delicious.'***

Rylanor's power fist swung around, bathed in fire. It struck Fulgrim on the shoulder, but Akhtar's psychic force was not simply confined to the Life

Eater’s detonation. Fulgrim laughed off the sluggish attack and one of his lower arms drew a glittering sword of alien origin. The blade sliced in a cruelly precise arc, cutting through the fibre-bundle motivators and servos.

Rylanor’s arm fell limp at his side.

Vistario watched the viral fire spread over the Dreadnought’s carapace, slipping inside his buckled plates of armour. Rylanor did not care whether he lived or died, only that Fulgrim went with him.

‘Do. Not. Do. This!’ barked the Dreadnought.

***‘Why not? I am your master – I can do whatever I like. I can crush you or I can raise you up. Return to the Legion. Accept the gifts of the Dark Prince and you will walk at my side, clad once again in flesh. You can be anything, old friend! I will sculpt you into something beautiful – a god to these mortals!’***

‘Never! All we have left between us is that we will die together!’ roared the Dreadnought, the upper portion of his carapace burning with blue flames. ‘I am Rylanor of the Emperor’s Children. Ancient of Rites, Venerable of the Palatine Host, and proud servant of the Emperor of Mankind, Beloved by all. I reject you now and always!’

Fulgrim laughed and said, ***‘I’m sorry, did it sound like I was offering you a choice?’***

The primarch wrenched his hand from Rylanor’s sarcophagus, dragging a sopping mass of fluid and matter with him. Glutinous ropes dripped from his fingers; he was like a midwife holding a mewling newborn. Ruptured cables spilled amniotic fluid so stagnant it must surely have been poisoning Rylanor with every passing second.

‘I will remake you, brother,’ said Fulgrim. ‘You will be my crowning achievement.’

Though his body was little more than rags of wet meat, Vistario sensed Rylanor’s horror at this last violation. An inescapable destiny where he would become that which he hated most.

*+What do we do?+*

The question was Murshid’s, and the connection between the Thousand Sons was so strong that the Athanaean’s perception for emotion spread to all three of them.

Vistario felt Fulgrim’s infinite malice, his cruel enjoyment of Rylanor’s anguish and the helplessness of the Thousand Sons. The primarch of the Emperor’s Children revelled in his overweening pride, a trait Magnus had

more than once told Vistario had been present long before his fall.

But more than anything, stronger even than Fulgrim's spite, Vistario felt Rylanor's pride and honour, the unbending core of greatness that had set him against his brothers and seen him descend into obsessive madness beneath the surface of a dead world.

Vistario took the measure of Fulgrim, seeing nothing worthy in him.

His warriors felt the moment his decision was made.

+Primarch Fulgrim!+ sent Vistario. +Rylanor deserves better than you.+

The primarch looked up, his once bright eyes now black and filled with the darkest poison.

+He deserves better than all of us.+

He raised his bolter and fired a mass-reactive into the back of Akhtar's skull. The Raptora's head exploded and with his death, the psychic force holding back the warhead's detonation ended.

Vistario saw fire.

And once more, all life burned.

It took much less time for the Life Eater to burn out on Isstvan III's second death. Its first ending had claimed eight billion lives, snuffed out in a matter of hours when Horus launched his bombardment from the *Vengeful Spirit.* With such plentiful mortal flesh to fuel the bio-killer's fury, the psychic scream was said to have eclipsed the Astronomican itself.

A shadow emerged from the undercity, a serpentine outline of cinders, held together by a web of neverborn energy. Not even the viral toxins wrought by ancient science could unmake that which the darkest powers of the warp had raised up.

The Phoenician's form was already weaving itself anew, but his soul was broken. For no pain, no hurt and no injury could wound such a being as much as denial of its magnificence.

*That* was Ancient Rylanor's final victory.

OceanofPDF.com

# MISBEGOTTEN

Dan Abnett

*OceanofPDF.com*

*‘Every man casts a shadow, not his body only, but his imperfectly mingled spirit.’*

– Emerson, M2

Years later, long after the Triumph of Ullanor, and the great bloodshed of the Heresy, and the darkness of the Fall that ended it, men forgot the hope they had once shared.

It had been a fine thing, a spirit that had invested and fortified every soul, human and post-human alike, as they stepped out from Terra upon the undertaking of reunion. They were torch-bearers, every one of them, carrying hope like a pure flame to illuminate the worlds and stars that had become lost from view in the long shadows of Old Night.

History knows this time as the Great Crusade, but the name was not favoured by the men who led it. The Emperor, who is now a watchful god, spoke to his sons on many occasions, affirming his desire that a better name be found. The word ‘crusade’ implied vengeance and cleansing, a scouring of worlds and a ruthless doom to all enemies. ‘There may be no enemies at all,’ Horus Lupercal had said. ‘Distance and strife have walled the galaxy

from us, and the old high routes and shiftways have fallen to disuse and are choked with unstirred dust. We have not passed that way in centuries. We have not been able. True, we bear our arms and strap our harness-plate upon us, ready to deal soundly with enemies arising. But we should not expect them, nor treat all we meet with that potential.'

Wars happened, and deeds of violent compliance driven by necessity. Those are the actions history remembers from that age. But for every world or culture that resisted, or denied the offer of friendship, for every xenos race that baulked and drew arms at the approach of mankind, a hundred worlds rejoiced and hymned their relief to see the expeditionary fleets take high anchor in their skies. The Great Crusade, so called by those who came later, was for the most part bloodless. Though the expeditionary fleets raced out from Terra like the fragments of a nail bomb, they voyaged not to destroy but to locate the lost and scattered branches of the human species, to rebuild and re-light a galactic culture that Strife and Old Night had, together, put asunder.

Men forget that now. They forget the hope that had carried them forward. The wound of the Heresy War acts as monstrous punctuation in the texts of history, making it impossible to recall or even believe the spirit of optimism that had prevailed in the years prior.

Two days before his death, Horus Lupercal is said to have cried out that all hope was gone.

He was not foreseeing the murder that would end the civil war. Those close to him, though there were only a few left by then, believed he was lamenting the age before Ullanor, before Davin, before Isstvan and Calth. The time of uplifted spirit, and a resolve that seemed unbreakable. A glorious and inspiring template for the future that came from dreams of noble majesty, not visions of heresy.

A future that had seemed possible, until it was suddenly not. A future worth dying for, and, certainly, worth living for.

Ullanor had been marked. The greenskin xenos, 'orks' in expedition parlance, had risen to be one of the foremost real enemies of the Reunion Project. There was no dealing with them. Their bestial nature brooked no compliance and no negotiation. Plans had been drawn, threats assessed, and Ullanor had been identified as the site where the xenos menace would be met and put down.

The expedition fleets were rearming for deployment. Time was precious. Fleet strategists proposed a window of eight months relative before Ullanor ceased to be a viable fight zone and the xenos campaign would be obliged to shift strategies to a new target world.

Lupercal's fleet, the 63rd, lingered in the heliopause of the Issinium System, awaiting the return of compliance missions to Kest's Sun and Velich Tarn. Though eager to make shift, Horus Lupercal would not leave fleet elements behind.

The 63rd had remained on station at the Issinium fringe for twenty months, and in that time had recorded six compliances, all peaceful. First Captain Abaddon had led missions to Kiskayde and Phocis, and obtained glad fealty from the cultures on both worlds. The Ordinators of Kiskayde, indeed, had furnished the expedition with auxiliaries to demonstrate their willingness to support the Imperial cause. Kiskaydin jump-troops in engraved chrome armour lodged in the troop decks of the flagship, drilling in preparation for the xenos compliance, and learning, wide-eyed, the histories of Terra that they had missed out on. Kiskayde was a human colony culture established during the Age of Technology's stellar exodus; though their accents and habits were strange, they had not forgotten their rites of birth and blood.

Captains Targost and Sedirae had brokered peace with the Fiefworlds at Orlustre. Captain Goshen had negotiated settlement with the wary and mistrustful Motherkind of New Hearth, gently easing their concerns with gifts of high science and assurances of staged integration. Horus Lupercal had commended Lev Goshen for his adroit and sensitive diplomacy.

Lupercal himself had led an embassy to Issinium, and won the free compliance of High Concerns who governed the system. He had feasted with them for nine days, and shown no loss of enthusiasm as the performance of their oral history, which lasted for the entire feast, rolled on and ever on, sing-song.

Signals had come from Kest's Sun. Captains Loken and Qruze reported that the culture there was long dead. The signals that had drawn the fleet's attention had been found to be the automatic broadcasts of old telecommunication systems. Some viral plague, long defunct, had taken the ancient colonies during Old Night, and their beacons had been calling for help, pointlessly, for seven centuries. Loken and Qruze had spent a month searching the empty tomb cities for signs of life, or of stasis-held survivors. Now they were en route back to the fleet.

Seven cultures: six new friends and allies returning to the fold, and one lost. A fine result to show for twenty months' work, with no loss of life, though the Mournival quietly complained for lack of martial practice.

'Tell them it will come,' Horus told Maloghurst, his equerry. 'Ullanor awaits, and Ullanor will give them the test they seem to long for. But tell them too… they should not wish for it. That we can bring our kin together, and no blood spilled, is the way my father would prefer. We are sensible beings, so we have prepared ourselves for war better than any species in the sea of stars. But though we are well made for battle, we always must desire it least of all possible outcomes.'

Velich Tarn was, then, that least of all desired outcomes. Assessed first as an outpost, or a small, starveling survivor stronghold, it had proven non-compliant. Captain Sejanus, favoured of all Lupercal's commanders, had led the embassy there and met ferocious resistance from the outset. His reports back to the waiting fleet had been brief and matter-of-fact. The environment was poor, and the human enclave there well fortified and armed with what he categorised as 'bio-mechanoid' weapons. They had first ignored and then rejected Sejanus' requests for contact. All hope of compliance had foundered when the Velich Tarn enclave commenced open hostilities. Their population was small – scans revealed only four hundred people – but their mindset was smaller. Velich Tarn would not submit to Imperial authority or even Imperial contact. 'They are extreme xenophobes,' Sejanus had written in a communique, clearly with a heavy heart, 'and refuse to deal with us. Despite their small numbers, they are formidably weaponised. They are determined to resist, and if left alone, I fear they will grow into a significant threat to stability in this zone. With regret, my lord, I request your permission to illuminate them.'

Horus read this missive quietly. Maloghurst and the others present could see from his humour that he was disappointed, and that he empathised deeply with his friend Hastur Sejanus' reluctance. Too many pockets of human survival had reacted to expedition forces with hate and fear during the course of the Great Reunion, most often the smallest and most isolated. Illumination was a last resort.

Horus granted the request, and sent tidings of consolation and forbearance to Sejanus.

A week later, Sejanus requested that the rest of his Fourth Company

strength join him.

His reports were now referring to the opposition as ‘the biomechs’ or the ‘biomech obscenities’, and rating resistance as ‘severe’. He had identified their leader as a man named Fo, and suggested ‘…there is no dealing here, nor option for truce. Illumination must proceed to its most miserable extent, and this blight be erased.’

‘I’m going to Sejanus,’ Horus told Maloghurst.

‘My lord,’ Maloghurst chided softly. ‘Hastur has it in hand, and is reinforced. Qruze and Loken are due back from Kest’s sun in two days. We are ready to make shift to Ullanor.’

‘My brave wolf Hastur struggles with this,’ said Horus. ‘It is a bloody business, the worst dealings we must contend with in this project. Worse than xenos-breed, for this is our own kind turned feral. I will support him. Oh, don’t look at me like that, equerry. This is the last business we must undertake in this zone, and the only one that has proved bloody. I’ll see it done away cleanly at Hastur’s side. I’ll not leave a mess here in this quadrant, nor leave one of my sons to bear the bitter burden alone.’

‘If this is your wish, lord,’ Maloghurst replied, for he knew when even his artfully twisted persuasion would not work.

‘It is,’ said Lupercal. ‘Besides, I have been reading.’

‘Reading, my lord?’

‘Idly. From the old annals. I think I know who this Fo is.’

Even from orbit-descent, Velich Tarn did not look like a place any man would wish to stay for more than a day, let alone the millennia Fo’s people were believed to have sheltered there.

Bone spires of rock rose like lines of fangs from miasmal lowlands and plutonic lakes that were toxic beyond any reason of local enviro-chemistry. Striated clouds raced across the skies, low and dense, thick with pollutants, driven by crosswinds of blast-zone force.

Illumination had gripped a corner of the landscape, the region of the main enclave. Uplands had been fractured by orbital weapons, and kilometres of rubble still glowed as the heat leaked out of it. The broken curtain hills lay under a vast pall of grey smoke that rose like the breath of a supervolcano hours from obliterating itself.

In the scorching twilight beneath the plume, the valley was alight with thousands of snapping, winking, flashing darts of weaponsfire as the entire

Fourth Company of the Luna Wolves, along with mechanised support, maintained the grind to break Fo's enclave open.

Hastur Sejanus, his plate scored and dented, hurried up the dirt track to the landing zone. A Stormbird, its white hull grimed with atmospheric soot, was just settling on the wide mesh pads beyond the lines of empty troop carriers and landing barges. Daggers of blue flame stabbed from its vector jets as it touched down. Sejanus felt the thump of its mass transmitted through the temporary mesh decking.

Sejanus was alone. There hadn't been time to pull men out of the fighting line to form an honour guard. Lupercal, with characteristically puckish glee, had chosen not to give the Fourth Company captain advance notice of his arrival.

Sejanus strode out across the pad, steam roiling around his feet, the landing masts winking in the yellow light. The Stormbird's landing jaws were opening. Horus was already on the ramp.

'My lord,' Sejanus began.

Horus, in full war-plate, stepped out and embraced his captain.

'Don't, Hastur,' he said.

'My lord?'

'I know you, old friend. First, an apology for the lack of due ceremony. Then, some demand for censure for taking so very long to crush this nest of vermin.'

'I admit, I had both prepared.'

'Forget them,' said Horus. 'Let's talk inside.'

They crossed to the nearest modular. Inside, air-scrubbers purged the atmosphere lock, and recycle pumps hosed them in decontam spray. They entered the main command module, uncoupling their war-helms.

'Let me have the room,' Sejanus commanded.

The officers present saluted and withdrew. They were alone in the low-ceilinged strategy station, unmanned cogitators streaming battlefield data onto their raised glass plates.

'You came to…?' Sejanus asked, letting the question trail.

'Offer support,' said Horus. He set down his helm, glanced around, and then smiled at the captain. 'Your reports are candid, but brief, Hastur. I can tell, more by what you don't say than what you do, that this place plagues you.'

Sejanus shrugged. His face was drawn. Horus had never seen Sejanus so freighted with stress.

‘I have tried to be succinct,’ he replied. ‘This place is a bane. This enemy… inhuman. In the light of the glorious compliances lately achieved, I felt I should spare the bald horror of it. When this is done, it is a thing better forgotten.’

‘The truth is what the truth is, Hastur. I’m not a sensitive soul that needs to be coddled. And even in our worst moments, we may learn things that we may benefit from in later evaluation. You’ve maintained a full battle record?’

‘Of course. We could have reviewed it together at some later date. Lord, this war is all but won. My spearhead squads are just hours away from taking the enclave heart.’

‘How many have you lost, Hastur?’

Sejanus paused.

‘Sixteen men dead,’ he said. ‘Another thirty wounded to such extent that augmetic repair will be required. Usually limb loss. I am ashamed of these loss statistics.’

‘Because you are a full company of the Imperium’s finest Legion, and you face just four hundred souls?’

‘Yes, lord.’

‘Fo’s people must be something indeed. That’s an unprecedented proportional hit-rate.’

‘It is,’ said Sejanus, ‘which is why I have kept it to myself for now. But Fo’s people… are not people. Four hundred life signs is misleading. I believe there are less than thirty actual humans present on this world. Perhaps none at all. Our systems interpreted multiple and blended life readings and came up with a figure of four hundred. But each one could mean… a dozen… a thousand…’

‘A dozen or a thousand what?’

Sejanus crossed to one of the primary cogitators, entered his code and pulled up pict-capture from the combat archives. Sliding with his fingertip, he began to lay the images out across the glass screen, as a man might spread paper pictures on a table.

‘Wait, wait, what am I looking at?’ asked Horus. ‘What is this?’

He touched the screen. A yellow rune highlighted one image and enlarged it, bringing it to the fore. A blur, motion-stabilised. Steel teeth, like human

incisors, arranged in a grinding circle like the head of a mining rock-drill. A snout of cream bone armour. Massive jaw-muscles exteriorised, reinforced with hydraulic baffles, sheathed in the folds of a throat that bellied like a serpent.

'Bio-mech,' replied Sejanus. 'Bio-mechanical constructs. Engineered to kill. Some as small as a man's hand, others larger than a drop-ship.'

'Engineered?'

'Gene-edited. Spliced, reworked from human stock.'

Horus pulled more images to the front and stared at them. Each one showed a new horror, as if he were flicking through a pict-book of a madman's nightmares.

'Everything you see is human,' said Sejanus.

'There's barely anything I recognise as remotely human,' said Horus quietly.

'Quite. But bio-scans are precise. Everything coming at us is genetically human. Woven from this colony's original human stock. Some combine the genes of more than one source individual. Multiple others are worked from a single origin gene-donor. All are reinforced and weaponised with cybernetics.'

'Hence the misleading life scans?'

Sejanus nodded. 'We're facing thousands of individual bio-mech hostiles. Potentially, over a hundred thousand. Every single one of them is capable of killing a fully armed legionary. But they are all derived from the same four hundred human originals.'

He looked at Horus. 'My wolves have given them names, lord. I have tried to discourage it. Cyberzerkers. Biomecannibals. Misbegots. They are feral horrors. The least of them make the greenskins seem mild. The worst is… there is no sane reason for any of them.'

'Sane reason?'

'I mean, lord… in the sense of design. They're just like nightmares. Nightmares of flesh, made flesh. Some are so clumsy and grotesque they seem to serve no other purpose than to disgust.'

Sejanus summoned up more images. A pallid thing like a starfish, the limbs human arms, a beaked mouth at the centre. A thorned snake as thick as a tree trunk, formed from translucent intestine. Something made entirely of weeping eyes. Here, four thick, human legs bearing a sack that opened in a gaping orifice that was a mouth within a mouth within a mouth.

Glistening things covered in blisters and horns. Pulsing things festooned with barbs. Things made of interlocked hands that cupped drooling mouths and glaring pupils. Things sheathed in fingernail horn, their exposed flanks stippled with coarse black hairs and open sores.

‘These are the constructs Fo has made,’ said Sejanus.

Horus glanced at him. ‘In the Dark Age,’ he said, ‘before Old Night fell, there was a man called Fo. Basilio Fo. A bio-engineer. A self-proclaimed Worker of Obscenity. The data is very incomplete…’

‘It would be,’ remarked Sejanus. ‘The Age of Technology ended five millennia past.’

Horus nodded. ‘The creature called Fo mentioned in the annals was a monster even by the standards of that godless age. Hunted for his blasphemous work, he fled Terra during the stellar exodus. He was presumed lost, long dead.’

He looked at Sejanus. ‘But given his gifts and skill-set, it may be he has survived. Endured is perhaps a better word. Sejanus, we may have found the hidden bastion of one of history’s foulest creatures.’

The vox-system chimed. Sejanus turned and took the signal, listening carefully.

He looked back at Lupercal.

‘Illumination complete,’ he said. ‘We have compliance. Daerec Terminator squad reports penetration of the enclave’s main bunker and the capture of Fo. They’re bringing him here. No other humans found. Not whole ones.’

Horus nodded, and clapped Sejanus on the arm.

‘Your bleak efforts are rewarded, Hastur.’

Sejanus allowed himself a thin smile.

‘I think it was you that turned the tide, lord. Word of your unexpected arrival quickly spread. The Fourth was inspired by your presence. They redoubled their efforts so as not to disappoint you.’

‘A coincidence, I’m sure,’ replied Horus. ‘Since when did the Fourth ever slacken?’

‘Perhaps,’ said Sejanus. ‘But you have an effect. The enemy must have learned of your arrival too, through vox intercept. Their heart was lost to learn a primarch was upon them. Just as our efforts renewed, Daerec reports the biomech misbegots lost a degree of frenzy. Their resistance broke, as if they were, at last, afraid of us.’

‘They faltered just as I arrived?’ asked Horus.

‘As fast as word spread,’ said Sejanus.

Horus paused. He picked up his war helm.

‘Hastur?’

‘My lord?’

‘Get your weapon,’ he growled. ‘They were waiting for me.’

Sejanus began to reply, but his words were lost. The entire west side of the command module ripped out, and hell poured in at them.

The misbegot was the size of three landing ships. It had bored up through rock and soil beneath the Luna Wolves’ forward base, breaching the crust of the world as easily as an ocean creature might rise up from the unlit depths and break the surface. Endless rows of grinding teeth had gnawed the ground away. Great loops and ridges of muscle had pulsed to heave the giant thing along its burrow.

It had no form, yet it had all forms. It was a vast bulk, a slab of flesh reinforced with a rib cage that would have made the frame of a generous dwelling hall. Yet it was also a writhing forest of limbs, of clawing hands, of amputee stumps that wedged and stabilised its weight. It was eyes, wide and weeping, clustered like egg sacks. It was mouths, some opening in its centre mass, some lunging forward on whip-spined necks, every gullet specialised and distinct. One to snap, one to bite, one to grind, one to sever, one to grasp and hold as others fed.

It had no symmetry whatsoever. It was a sample of organic nightmares and anatomical shocks fused in one flesh, resembling no creature, terrestrial or xenos.

Yet its one defining horror was that it, and every disparate part of it, was unmistakably human.

And it was fast. Despite its size, it groped and slithered like a charging grox. It demolished the module chamber, shredding reinforced fabric in a blizzard of splinters, rending cogitator stations into scatters of sparks and debris, ripping up deck plates and undermatting like paper.

Staggered backwards by the shockwave of its burst assault, Lupercal and Sejanus braced side by side, unslung their weapons and unleashed streams of bolter fire into this onrushing misbegot. Wounds stippled the face of it, exploding fibres of flesh and muscle, erupting clouds of blood drizzle. Each gaping injury would have been the kill-wound for any beast of comparable scale.

It did not flinch.

Even with the most curious xenos-form, there was always some defining sense of biology. A common-sense estimation of vital parts, of head or heart, or principal organs. The misbegot's lack of symmetry made such determinations impossible.

'With me,' said Horus.

They fell back through a junction hall into the adjoining module, reloading as they ran. Alarms were already screeching, triggered by seismic tremblers, perimeter auspex and integrity monitors. The klaxons were drowned out by the grinding roar of the horror as it pulverised the modular compartments to get at them.

Ahead, Horus saw men rallying to meet the attack: the startled fleet officers who manned the forward base, army auxiliaries, tactical staff, and a few Luna Wolves charged with station defence.

'Legiones Astartes, at my side!' Horus yelled. 'The rest, fall back!'

Only the armoured would stand a chance. The rest would die in seconds. Some were already spluttering as the corrosive air of Valich Tarn flooded the compromised habitat.

Yet they hesitated, for it was Lupercal, death opening its door at his heels, and they had pledged their lives and come to the stars to stand at his side.

'I command it! Save yourselves now!' Horus cried.

They obeyed, reluctant. The Luna Wolves, six of them, made a line with Horus and the Fourth's captain. The misbegot bore down, half submerged in the ground, sliding through flooring and rock alike, humped spine visible, flinging deck plates aside in its wake. The walls perished. The gale entered. Eight bolters began to fire, spattering meat and swirling the air with blood-smoke.

It reached them, unstopped, unslowed. Some buried, forward part of it tore up through the decking and dragged a Luna Wolf down, churning tooth-drills shredding his legs and lower torso.

'My lord!' Sejanus howled.

The misbegot reared up, its titanic form supported by straining appendages and its gnarled trans-skeletal frame.

Horus stood his ground. His warblade gleamed in his armoured fist.

'Go back to hell,' he whispered.

'You slew it?' asked Fo.

Horus sat down facing him in the stark cell-block chamber. He was drenched in blood, and the chest and fore-guards of his plate were gouged and stripped back to bare metal. He made no answer at first. Blood dripped off him onto the deck. A trail of little blood pools led back to the hatch.

‘It was reluctant to die,’ said Horus. ‘I dismantled your work until I found the one part it could not persist without.’

Fo nodded. He was small and bird-like, his forehead broad, his eyes bright. He perched rather than sat, hunched in his simple black robes.

‘You were waiting for me,’ said Horus.

Fo shrugged.

‘I knew you would come one day, and when you did, I would not win. I resolved to make my stand count for something. If not defeat the enemy, then eliminate the greatest of its party. Its leader.’

‘You knew I would come?’ asked Horus.

Fo nodded.

‘Mm-hmm. You or something like you. One day. Eventually. It’s been a long time, but it was inevitable. Terra endures.’

‘You left there a long time ago.’

‘My art was not appreciated.’

‘I have seen it first-hand. That does not surprise me. Abominations, Fo.’

‘Abominations?’ Fo smiled, and showed small and perfect teeth. ‘I see tastes have not changed.’

He sat back.

‘I have been monitoring your activity since you arrived in this zone twenty months ago,’ he said. ‘Through my listening stations and watch-networks, I have observed your dealings with local cultures. Your message. Your offer of embrace. I knew you would knock on my door before long.’

‘And you were prepared,’ said Horus. ‘Afraid, for you thought we would judge you as poorly as the people of Terra once did.’

Fo frowned.

‘No, you are mistaken,’ he replied. ‘You think I left Terra because I was driven out? Shunned? Demonised? No, no. All artists and innovators are misunderstood.’

‘Then why?’

‘Because I saw the start of his rise,’ said Fo. ‘Even then, early days, but I could see what he would become. Your father, I mean. I knew what future awaited a man who dreamed the dreams he did. Though it took decades or

centuries or longer, I knew he would not be denied. I wanted no part of that. I wanted to be as far away as possible.'

'Why?' asked Horus.

'His dream is unthinkable, yet he has the power to make it real. I see he has begun to now. You… you have reached the stars.'

'Yes, bearing his message. His hope to–'

'Hope?' Fo shook his head sadly. 'Yes. Naturally, he would tell his children that. He always made things sound so optimistic. A glorious and endless future. But, of course, you wouldn't understand.'

'I don't,' said Horus, rising. 'You are a maker of abominations. A creator of the most obscene things I have ever beheld. I presume a mind as transgressive as yours would see only horror in the splendour of his ambition. And fear the justice he would mete upon you for your crimes against the human form.'

'Oh god, no!' cried Fo in surprise. He hesitated. 'Do they still speak of god on Terra? Do they still believe? I suppose not. They wouldn't have to now. Anyway, you're wrong. I don't fear his justice. You say I have made abominations? Look what *he* has made.'

'What do you mean?' asked Horus.

'I mean you. You and beings like you. You think I've made monsters? In my wildest deliriums I could not have designed monsters like you. I practise simple and ingenious arts of genetics and anatomy. I tinker and edit, to make puzzles and delights and curious wonders, things to make us think, and ponder the nature of our being and our place in the scheme of life.'

He looked up at Horus.

'I do not make things that will burn the galaxy down. I do not make things that will doom our species and lead it into an endless frenzy of war. You are the most abominable thing I have ever seen. Grotesque. Sickening. Misbegotten. I could not hope to kill you all, but to abort just one before it reached potential… well, that would have been some solace.'

Fo got up, and brushed down his clothes.

'I'd like to die now,' he said. 'I don't want to live in a cosmos where things like you are loose.'

'What will you do?' asked Hastur Sejanus.

'We'll purge this place. Let nothing of Fo's work remain. And quickly, Hastur. The fleet awaits.'

‘Will you execute him as he asks?’

Horus shook his head.

‘For his crimes against the species, I should, I suppose,’ he replied. ‘But I will place him on a ship and bring him to meet our father. Fo is mad, but I dearly wish he could glimpse the honest and whole truth once before his life ends.’

‘You want his compliance?’

‘His ideas are so wrong, Hastur. This is an enlightened age and we are the messengers of hope. A hope that our kind has lacked through all the ages past until this era. I want this man to know his error, and appreciate the truth. It’s the least I can do for him.’

‘You are too merciful,’ said Sejanus.

‘If that is my only flaw, I am glad of it,’ said Horus. ‘His notions unsettled me. How could any man misunderstand the glory of our enterprise so completely? How could any man fear the likes of me?’

Years later, long after the Triumph of Ullanor, and the great bloodshed of the Heresy, and the darkness of the Fall that ended it, men forgot the hope they had once shared.

On ancient Terra, in those final days of the Fall, Basilio Fo heard the thunder approaching through the stout walls of his oubliette cell in the depths of the Imperial Palace.

And, despite the madness that had by then consumed him, he knew he had been right, all along, not to submit to hope.

*OceanofPDF.com*

# THE VERDICT OF THE SCYTHE

David Annandale

*OceanofPDF.com*

Death closed in on Absyrtus like the mailed fist of a god. A fleet of grey ships, each of them powerful enough to lay waste to a world, shouldered through the planet's defence systems as if they weren't even there. Orbital platforms fired beam weapons pointlessly into void shields that barely flickered. The god's hand smashed the platforms aside contemptuously. It reached low anchor and struck its blow.

At the head of the attack was a ship three kilometres long. It was the *Fourth Horseman*. No void ship this large should have still been descending, but the attack barque was heading for the planet's surface. Already, its heat shields were glowing red as it burned its way down through the mesosphere. It was brutish, merciless, unyielding.

Mortarion stood on the bridge of the *Fourth Horseman*, his eyes on the main viewport, waiting for the murky clouds below to part and expose his prey to his sight.

'Drop pods launched,' a vox-officer called out. 'Storm Eagle flights away.'

Mortarion gave a bare nod of acknowledgment. He already knew. He had given the commands, and his Death Guard obeyed them as perfectly as if every ship and every legionary were extensions of his body. The hail of landings striking downwards was the sweep of his scythe. The Death Guard

acted as a single entity, animated by his will.

The *Fourth Horseman* plunged through the roiling clouds, searing them with its passage. The deck vibrated as the gigantic ship descended, the planet's atmosphere burning as it pushed back against the adamantine monster. The attack barque began to slow, but its landfall would still be a deathblow.

As if defeated, the clouds parted. The city of Temnis appeared far below, a sprawling web, its walls no more than a gossamer perimeter thread. There were faint sparks on the wall's length as its guns opened up on the approaching colossus.

Standing beside the primarch, Calas Typhon said, 'I can't imagine they think that artillery will slow us down.'

'That is a gesture of defiance, not a tactic,' said Mortarion. 'Their primary defence will come at closer range, after we land.'

'Their sorcery,' Typhon said quietly.

'Their crime and their death sentence.'

When the Death Guard had been tasked with bringing Absyrtus into compliance, Mortarion had gone over the data-slates reporting conditions on the world with cold, tightening anger. Absyrtus was an echo of Barbarus, with a sorcerous ruling class in power. Its physical conditions were harsh, and if they were not as toxic as those on Barbarus, that hardly mattered. It was the enslavement of the population by sorcery that had summoned his wrath. This was humanity's great torment. There would never be true freedom in the galaxy until its last traces had been exterminated.

Liberation came through death. There was no other recourse for the poison that held Absyrtus in its grip.

'What vox traffic from the other population centres?' Mortarion called out.

'We are picking up signs of alarm, but no organised response, Lord Primarch. Most of the traffic is calls for help and requests for instruction.'

Mortarion nodded again. This was as he had expected. Temnis was the centre of life on Absyrtus in every respect. 'Their centre will not hold,' he said. 'Without it, all will fall apart.'

The city gathered definition in the viewport. Its precise contours had been unknown until now. It had been shielded by the thick cloud cover, and the reports of scouts had been badly incomplete. Now it was open to Mortarion's gaze. It stood upon a group of low hills. On a rise in the eastern sector was the largest complex. That would be the seat of the planet's

government.

It was time to decide where the *Fourth Horseman* would hit.

‘Do we strike the heart?’ Typhon asked.

It was what they had done on Galaspar. The attack barque had smashed into the primary hive like a glaive chopping into a wasp nest, and its troops had poured in, purging resistance with fire. If the *Fourth Horseman* aimed for the complex on the hill, it would hit the regime with the impact of an asteroid.

Galaspar. Mortarion’s most signal victory, the one where he had shown what his Legion could and *would* do to bring a war to an end, and the conquest that had earned stinging rebukes from his brothers. They had not been there a year ago. They had not read the battlefield as he had. They would not have brought the war to such a sudden and total halt as he did. By fighting as brutally as he had, he had liberated a hundred billion citizens from the tyranny of the Order. And yet. There was that look in his father’s eyes. The look that haunted him now.

Galaspar was not Barbarus, and Absyrtus was not Galaspar. Temnis was a fraction of the size of the Galaspar hives. It had nowhere near the same level of defence. Mortarion was here to liberate humanity. He came to destroy a regime. He was not here to exterminate a planet.

Bringing the *Fourth Horseman* down on that complex would break the spine of Absyrtus’ defences in an instant. But the sector was densely populated. It had the highest concentration of structures in the entire city. Slaughter was necessary in war…

‘But not always,’ Mortarion whispered to himself.

‘Lord Primarch?’ Typhon asked.

Mortarion ignored him. ‘That is a space port,’ he said, pointing to an area to the west of the complex. It was flat, paved, and sat between the hills. ‘Take us down there.’ It was a worthwhile strategic target, and the civilian population would be sparse.

*This will be enough*, Mortarion thought. His eyes moved over the contours of the city. He saw where the drop pods would land outside the wall, the barracks on the inside that the gunships would attack and destroy before landing their troops, and the impact the *Fourth Horseman* would have at the space port. *This will be more than enough*.

The attack barque changed orientation as it drew closer to the surface, and Temnis disappeared from the viewport. Mortarion turned his eyes to the

vid-feed above it. Temnis seemed to rush towards its conqueror. Mortarion stretched out his hand. The fingers of his gauntlet hooked like talons to claim the prey. This was how he would take the city. This was how he *was* taking the city, even now. As his orders were executed, he knew what happened at every landing site, even before the reports reached the ship.

He was there as the drop pods came down in force outside the main gates, and his legionaries began their steady, unwavering march on the defences. He was there as the Storm Eagles' Vengeance rocket launchers turned the barracks into smoking craters, and there when the gunships landed, unleashing another tide of warriors who closed on the walls from the other side. And he was here in the *Fourth Horseman* as it thundered down on the space port, three kilometres of brutish ship, melting the rockcrete with the down blast of its engines and its superheated hull, crushing the feeble vessels of Temnis beneath its landing gear. The attack barque's massive guns turned the tanks that approached from the outskirts of the space port into molten ruins.

'Sorcerers on the walls,' the vox-officer warned. 'Spatial distortions reported. Warp bolts hitting our troops.'

'Burn them out,' Mortarion said. 'Burn them all out.'

He did not have to be present to know that his Deathshroud Terminators were obeying his command by hurling phosphex bombs onto the walls. He knew that crawling, green fire was melting the flesh from bones all along the ramparts of Temnis. He knew that sorcery was meeting an end that, no matter how agonising, was more merciful than it deserved.

The struggle ended before Mortarion, Typhon and the leading ranks of the First Great Company had reached the bottom of the attack barque's troop ramps.

*'Lord Primarch,'* the vox-officer called. *'We are receiving a request for a cease fire.'*

'Patch it through,' Mortarion said coldly. He had not granted one on Galaspar. Let his brothers think what they would. He was conducting this war, and he knew best. He had taken the measures he needed to liberate the population.

*And yet… and yet… The look in father's eyes…*

His vox-bead crackled in his ear. Then a desperate voice spoke.

*'This is Queen Cirkesce of Absyrtus. We beg you to accept our surrender. Whatever your terms are, we accept them without reservation. Only spare*

*our people. Please, spare our people.*’

Mortarion hesitated. Beside him, Typhon stirred, also receiving messages.

‘The enemy is laying down arms across the city,’ Typhon said. ‘Our foe is surrendering.’

‘Without terms,’ said Mortarion. This was not Galaspar. When the Order had sued for peace, its goal had been self-preservation. This ruler was pleading for her people. The situation was not the same. Not at all.

‘Do we continue, Lord Primarch?’ Typhon asked.

*What are you?* Mortarion asked himself. His instinct was to continue to prosecute the battle until no enemy was left. This was a regime that used sorcery. It needed to vanish. Now it seemed that it was willing to do so.

A new path opened up before Mortarion. It was not one he had ever conceived of as possible. It might be for Roboute. It certainly was for Vulkan. Not for Konrad, though. And never for himself. But here it was. There was nothing to fight. The enemy was pleading to surrender. If he continued to prosecute the war, what would he become?

*‘Great lord, spare my people,’* came the voice on the bead again.

Mortarion clenched his teeth. He did not answer the voice. He switched the channel to the command network and issued a new order. ‘Cease fire,’ he said, and he arrested the sweep of the scythe.

Legionaries lined both sides of the street leading to the entrance of the royal palace. The building was at the centre of the complex Mortarion had identified during the *Fourth Horseman*’s descent. It was built of soot-darkened limestone, a soaring spire rising up every hundred metres along its circular wall. The stonework was elaborately wrought, but had been eaten away by acid rain over time, and not been repaired. The windows were dull, leaded glass.

Mortarion walked up the gentle slope of the boulevard with Typhon and an escort of the Deathshroud honour guard. The queen of Absyrtus waited for them at the entrance to the palace. The doors were wide open. She was alone.

‘I do not understand why we have left this place standing,’ Typhon said.

‘Because it was not necessary to destroy it,’ Mortarion told him. The words felt strange to utter. He was not sure he believed them. But he needed to put them to the test.

‘Are you sure of this?’ Typhon asked, as if reading his mind.

‘I intend to be. One way or the other.’

There was the sound of a crowd from somewhere in the near distance, but there was no one on the streets on this side of the palace. The facades of the buildings along the street were dark and empty.

As Mortarion approached the palace doors, the queen bowed low.

‘You are welcome, Lord Mortarion,’ she said. ‘This house is now yours, to do with as you see fit. In gratitude for your mercy, grant me the honour of letting me be your guide.’ There was nothing but deference in her manner, yet there was little of the awe Mortarion was used to in other mortals, as if there were something else that had already claimed her capacity for wonder. She was an older woman, her hair white, a delicate tracery of wrinkles surrounding her lips and eyes. Her face was strong, and her eyes were a deep shade of green. Her gaze was open and frank, and did not seem to mind the obvious distaste with which Mortarion regarded her. Her robes, though handsome, were relatively simple. They were a bit worn on the hems and sleeves, as if much work was done while wearing them. They were dark, with sigils embroidered in gold thread. Mortarion frowned when he saw them, but at least she was not dissembling.

Behind Cirkesce, the entrance hall of the palace was empty. The surrender appeared to be total. She was throwing herself on Mortarion’s mercy. He was not yet convinced that he had any.

‘Very well,’ he said. ‘Show me.’

Cirkesce bowed again in thanks, and led the way into the palace. After the entrance hall, they began to encounter servants. Mortarion watched them closely. They were not cowed by the presence of their queen. It was clear that it was he who frightened them. They were turning to Cirkesce for reassurance. She smiled gently at each one she passed. She kept murmuring, ‘All will be well, all will be well,’ to them, like a mother soothing an anxious child before sleep.

*This is not Barbarus*, Mortarion thought. *This is not Barbarus at all*. He glanced at Typhon. The First Captain had kept his helmet on and walked on stolidly, facing forwards, keeping his views to himself.

Cirkesce took them through the main chambers of the palace. She took special care to show them two spaces. One was the council hall, now sitting empty. The other was a chapel. It was in the centre of the palace, circular, like the building, and was the only chamber in the palace that appeared to be fully cared for. In the middle of its floor was an altar. It was rectangular,

but its lines were strangely curved. It appeared to be in motion, as if the stone were a cross section of a wave. It was hard to look at directly, and in the corner of the eye, it seemed to twist. The walls, floor and ceiling were polished black marble, with runes in silver inlay that seemed to flow from Cirkesce's robes into the stone.

'This is our place of ritual,' the queen said.

'No more,' said Mortarion. 'You have been apprised of the articles of compliance?'

'I have.'

'And you accept them?'

'I do.'

'You understand there is no place in the Imperium for such rituals.'

'I do.'

'Your people will no longer be subject to rule by sorcery.'

He thought there might have been the smallest hesitation before she agreed again. He wasn't sure.

'This chamber will be destroyed,' he continued.

'I understand.'

The ritual hall was in the lowest level of the palace. The queen now led them up grand flights of stairs to the uppermost floor.

'The people await you, Lord Mortarion,' Cirkesce said.

She brought them through a wide, airy chamber to a balcony overlooking a great square. Here was the crowd that Mortarion had heard earlier. The citizens of Temnis had gathered in the tens of thousands, anxious faces staring up at the balcony. Cirkesce stepped forwards, and when she was greeted with a grateful cry, Mortarion saw how truly, utterly different the relationship between the rulers and the ruled on Absyrtus was from what it had been on Barbarus.

'Fear not!' Cirkesce called to the crowd. 'All will be well. You have been afraid, but let the fear pass. The war is over, peace has returned, and we are now taking our place in the Imperium of Man. Do not think we have been conquered, for we were wrong to fight. We should have been welcoming our new destiny with open arms, so let us do so now! All will be well! All *is* well!'

She invited Mortarion to come forwards. He stared down at the thousands of faces. They gazed with adoration at the queen, and then, taking their cue from her, turned with hope to him. No one had ever looked at him in quite

that way. He felt odd, as if he were an imposter. He was not sure if the pretence was directed at the people of Absyrtus or at himself.

Mortarion was still wondering the same thing hours later when, with the Deathshroud standing behind him, he and Typhon sat on stone seats, honoured guests in the banquet hall of the royal palace, at a celebration of peace and union. He did not want to be here. He understood that people had a need for such a ritual, but he did not share that need, and he disliked the clamour and frivolity attendant upon the event. He sat opposite the queen, at one end of a huge table, long enough for thirty of the monarch's councillors and ministers.

The evening had consisted of one speech after another, each longer than the one before, all of them bland variations on the same obsequious theme. Over and over, Mortarion was assured of the gratitude of the people for the mercy he had shown, and of the utter loyalty and compliance of Absyrtus' government. Cirkesce caught Mortarion's eye every so often and smiled in sympathy. Then she turned back to the speakers, the smile becoming parental and indulgent.

The servility of these people, and the total capitulation, grated on Mortarion. He had no doubt every word was meant. They seemed so weak, it was hard to imagine that they had ever represented the smallest threat.

*But they did fight. They were prepared to resist until they saw that their efforts would be futile. They knew they could not defeat us, and so gave up immediately. Does that make them intelligent or cowardly?* Either way, he wished they were less voluble.

Typhon seemed no happier. He sat on Mortarion's right, resolutely silent, regarding the food and drink with glowering resignation. 'So this is what we have saved.' He spoke quietly enough so only Mortarion heard.

'Would you prefer compliance to have had a higher cost?'

Typhon shrugged. 'Is this who we are?' he asked.

'We must be shaped by our purpose, and not the other way around,' said Mortarion. The words rang false. He was taking steps down a path that many of his brothers would embrace, and that he believed his father would choose for him. He was not sure of his footing, though. The way ahead was unclear.

He went on. 'Our purpose is the liberation of humanity.' Of that, at least, he was sure. 'Death is not the only form of liberation.'

‘No,’ Typhon conceded. ‘But what if it is the form that *ours* takes?’

Mortarion thought for a moment, then shook his head. He had no good answer for Typhon.

‘What have we saved?’ Typhon asked. ‘Do we know that?’

‘I will learn tonight,’ Mortarion told him. ‘I will walk the streets of this city. I will learn its true nature.’

‘Like the Lords Fulgrim and Guilliman.’

‘No. Not like them. They do not look with my eyes.’

Mortarion walked the night. At his command, the Deathshroud held back the full forty-nine steps behind him. He wanted space to be alone with his thoughts.

He left the environs of the palace and headed south-west down its slope, into the densest of the residential sectors. There were celebrations everywhere, as if the war had lasted years instead of hours. Mortarion skirted their edges, coming close enough to get a sense of the revels, and then moving on. News of who he was had spread quickly, and all who saw him paused in their feasting and dancing to bow before him, pressing foreheads to the ground, calling out their praise and thanks. They had none of the practised formulations of the politicians, but they were just as ingratiating. Mortarion said nothing, his lip curling in disgust as he left the grovelling wretches behind.

He took streets at random, choosing smaller and smaller alleys, wandering in and out of cul-de-sacs. The hab complexes were low, none more than five storeys high. Like the palace, their walls were blackened with filth. The air was greasy, and tasted of the soot it carried from the industrial regions and blanketed over the city.

The windows of the buildings were close together, suggesting tiny, cramped dwellings. There were impromptu celebrations here too, but also many faces at the windows, looking down on the grey spectre and his grim escort that walked in their midst. The people in the streets abased themselves to him, but those at the windows stared silently, or ducked away.

*Is this liberation? Is there value in these lives?*

Perhaps there was. He was not seeing it, though. What he was seeing was a facade. He was seeing no more into the truth of these people than he was into their dwellings. The further he walked, the more he felt that what he had witnessed since arriving on Absyrtus was a brittle surface.

Things were wrong, though he could not see what yet. The same was true of this path he had chosen to try. He was growing more and more certain that he was making a mistake.

*Is that what I truly believe? Or what I want to believe?*

He didn't know. He needed certainty. And so he kept walking, and kept looking, willing the night to show him what he needed to know.

The dwellings became poorer the further down the hill he went. When he reached the base, he was in the slum areas. The habs crowded closer together. The people were shabbier, and the streets as empty as they were narrow and winding. Mortarion paused at the entrance to an alleyway that was so cramped, the blank walls of the buildings on either side almost brushed his shoulders. A sound had caught his ear. He heard a child crying, and what at first he had taken for a mother singing a lullaby.

She wasn't singing. She was chanting.

Mortarion walked down the alleyway, moving through the darkness towards the sounds. He stopped at a doorway. It was barely visible, the opening a maw of greater night. 'Wait at the palace,' he told the Deathshroud. He ducked low and crossed the threshold.

Refuse crunched under his boots. The stinking corridor turned at sharp angles, making no architectural sense. After the second turn, the darkness began to give way to a dull red glow. The chanting grew louder. The voice rasped and gurgled. The child's cries became more shrill. There was no comfort here.

Mortarion rounded another corner, and stepped into a low-ceilinged room. Tattered books crowded on sagging shelves. Incomprehensible carvings were scattered over every level space. They were, Mortarion thought, worse than the products of a disordered mind. There was a consistency to their insanity. They were the icons of delusional belief. There was an altar in the centre of the floor. It was a crudely hewn block of rockcrete, but it was clearly a product of the same faith as the altar in the royal palace. Despite the indifferent skill with which it had been made, it had some of the same strange suggestion of fluidity in stone.

An old woman bent over the altar, chanting harsh, slithering words. Strands of lank, grey hair hung from her. She was clad in rags, the patchwork worn with pride, another symbol of the tyranny of superstition that clung so ferociously to humanity.

There was no child in the room. As the woman chanted, stone flames

flickered into being over the altar, wavered, then vanished. The cries came from the flames during their evanescent lives. The air pulsed with the possibilities of creation.

A psyker, one given over to the madness her very existence made inevitable. Mortarion's jaw tightened in disgust.

The woman finished her chant and looked up at Mortarion. She smiled. One eye was pale, covered in cataracts. The other was clear. It gazed at him with a sharp, knowing expression that Mortarion now realised he had seen in Cirkesce's eyes at the banquet.

'Have you come to join me?' the woman asked with a whispering taunt. She showed no fear. She was violating the edicts of the compliance, and the commands of her queen. Perhaps she did not know about the new realities of Absyrtus, but Mortarion was sure she did. There was too much mockery in her gaze for her not to.

This creature was everything he strove to purge from the galaxy. She distorted reality around her. It would be a mistake, though, simply to destroy her and leave. There was something here he must know.

'I came to learn the truth of Absyrtus,' he said.

'Then you have found it.'

'What are you?'

'The one who does not hide.'

'There are others like you who hide.'

'All others,' she said, and cackled. 'Do you believe in surrender, great lord?'

'No,' he said. That was the easiest truth he had spoken in many hours.

'No. Neither does Absyrtus. It believes in survival.'

'Which you are dooming through your words.'

The woman ran a clawed finger across the altar, and the stone flowed like water, spiralling into beckoning patterns. 'There is nothing here that you can end,' she said.

'You are mistaken.'

'I think not.' The woman smiled and smiled and smiled.

Mortarion left, then. He did not kill her. Not yet. He needed to determine how deeply the infection she represented had spread. As he walked from her hovel, she whispered, 'Listen, Mortarion of Barbarus. Listen well.'

Mortarion listened. He looked. He did both with renewed suspicion. He made his way slowly back to the royal palace, and Temnis was transformed.

He had already made a new judgement before he stepped back into the alleyway. The path he had tried to walk was the wrong one. The attempt to do so had blinded him.

No longer. There were psykers everywhere, consumed by the irrationality they had embraced. They infested this world like a plague. Mortarion heard now the fragments of whispers that crawled into the night from the windows of the hab complexes. He saw the strange patterns scratched into the soot in shadowed corners of buildings. When he passed celebrations in the distance, and the participants did not see him, he saw the dances that were too frenzied. He saw the light of the fires bend unnaturally.

And he heard, from the darkest streets, the child's cry of the flames.

Typhon and the Deathshroud were waiting for him at the entrance to the palace when he returned. They saw what was written on his face. He did not have to say a word. They took up arms and marched with him, heading back to the Land Raiders that would return them to the space port and to the *Fourth Horseman*. Mortarion looked back once as they left the palace. On the top floor, lights blazed from the vast windows of the throne room. They silhouetted Cirkesce.

*You tried a different kind of sorcery. It won't save you either.*

He said nothing on the journey, except to issue a terse command recalling all troops to their landing ships and ordering a return to the orbiting fleet. The take-off of the *Fourth Horseman* turned night into day across Temnis, the fires of its rise even more terrible than those of its descent.

Mortarion broke his silence at last when he and Typhon were on the bridge once more, watching the city diminish below, and then disappear beneath the clouds.

'Ask me what you want to know,' he said.

'What did you see? Are we abandoning a conquest?'

'I saw the truth. I saw that you were right, Calas. The liberation we bring is death. There is nothing here to conquer. There is nothing to give to this world except death.'

'The compliance was a sham?'

'It was. The sorcery of this world is not the tool of its tyrants. It infects its society from top to bottom. There is nothing to be saved.' He paused, turning to the weapons officers. 'Ready cyclonic torpedoes.'

'By your command, Lord Primarch.'

‘Humans must be freed from sorcery,’ Mortarion said to Typhon. ‘But they cannot be reasoned out of it. So we must purge it by whatever means possible. What cannot be saved, must be turned into an example.’

‘Will examples be enough?’ Typhon asked.

‘Not on their own. The force that creates the examples must be known. And it must be without mercy.’

The *Fourth Horseman* reached orbit. The sphere of Absyrtus turned slowly before Mortarion. Its clouds no longer concealed anything from him. He saw clearly. He saw the path that was his. It was the one that had always been his.

‘Cyclonic torpedoes standing by, Lord Primarch,’ the officer reported.

He had halted the swing of his scythe. He would complete the strike now, and he would never hesitate again.

*You must become Death*.

If he had to be the greater horror in order to save humanity from itself, then that would be the burden he would shoulder.

‘Launch torpedoes,’ he said. ‘Turn that planet into a cinder.’

He watched the streak of the torpedoes burning into the atmosphere, and they were his hand too. He was reaching down to Absyrtus. With his scythe, he was bringing his verdict.

It was, he now knew, the only verdict he would ever give.

*OceanofPDF.com*

# THE CONQUEROR'S TRUTH

Gav Thorpe

*OceanofPDF.com*

I had hoped to see a new civilisation being forged from the raw firmament. The name of the galaxy-wide endeavour – the Great Crusade – conjured images of victorious parades and the symbols of the Emperor being erected over compliant worlds. All I had witnessed was grey blocks being piled atop each other while tax collectors counted them. As a remembrancer I had been chosen to document these events for the future knowledge of humanity. It seemed such an awe-inspiring task, possessed of the subtle but magnificent vision one would expect of the Emperor of Mankind. It was not enough that the immense Empire of Earth be rebuilt; its reconstruction had to be seen by every generation hereafter that benefited from its existence, lest they forget the toil required to grow their paradise.

But then the Emperor had not really been thinking about the 382nd Expeditionary Fleet. One of countless support echelon task forces that followed in the wake of the Legions and Imperial Army, the 382nd was a resettlement mission, comprising tens of thousands of civilians overseen by Terran bureaucrats, and guarded by a few warships and a regiment of the Imperial Army. In the two years since leaving Terra I had ample opportunity to record fields being ploughed for the first time, and foundation stones being lowered by future civic dignitaries, as well as no shortage of tedious

speeches by newly embedded Imperial commanders.

When the ship, imaginatively titled *Starhauler XXVI*, readied for translation to the Vestogorn system I retired to my dormitory as was usual. I was not keen on warp translation, and it seemed that jumping out of the warp was more testing to the body and mind than entering it, though numerous others had assured me of the fallacy of that notion. So I took to bed to distract myself from imminent translation, reviewing a few hours of pict-feed footage I had recorded of the lower deck servitors securing the massive grain transports that had been loaded at Eldgharad Station – a tiresome task I had been postponing for this very reason.

The lurch from unreality to reality started in the depths of my gut and quickly spread up the spine. I felt the pricks of a thousand invisible pins in the base of my skull and tasted iron on the tongue. Even lying down I felt a surge of vertigo and rolled to the side, expecting to vomit. As ever, the actual physical act never transpired, and I was left groaning and retching for several seconds.

I lay on my back with eyes closed for several minutes, trying not to imagine the room whirling around out of sight. It was a product of the imagination, nothing more, but I couldn't persuade a rebellious stomach to see things that way.

A siren sounded, long and plaintive, the first time I had ever heard it. I sat up, bringing on a fresh wave of nausea, heart racing at the thought of what the alarm might signify. It sounded again, three short bursts this time. The chime of the personal address panel on the wall next to the bunk was a further surprise, another break from a routine established over thirteen prior in-system jumps. It was Lieutenant Khagashu, the ship's commander.

*'Remembrancer Ares.'* I always smiled at the formality of his address. *'I suggest you may wish to join me at the upper viewing deck.'*

The link cut before I could reply, somewhat frustratingly. I was a passenger, not crew, so had no means to use the communicator to reach the bridge. Without anything further to explain the situation, I was left with only the option of getting up and venturing to the upper viewing deck.

On the way up the fifteen levels, I regained my equilibrium a little. I asked a few ratings and other crew that I passed what was happening. Most ignored the inquiries but one, cornered in a conveyor for three decks, furnished me with a brief response.

'It's a proximity warning,' the petty officer told me, her smile more forced

than comforting. ‘Not a battle alert or anything like that. Just some other ships in the system.’

‘That’s not usual, is it?’ I asked, but the conveyor doors opened and she continued on her way without further answer.

The lieutenant was waiting beside the immense armourglass window of the upper viewing deck. He had a couple of young ensigns with him, carrying data-slates. He seemed agitated, shoulders a little hunched, fingers clasped tightly together in the small of his back. Small signs, but ones I saw immediately. The officers had stopped playing me at cards straight after they’d learned about my gift for interpreting emotion.

Khagashu turned, trying to relax, and brought his heels together, as though coming to attention before a superior.

‘Remembrancer Ares–’

‘Call me Ennylin,’ I said, as always when he was so formal.

‘–we have translated into an occupied system.’ He examined me for a moment, brow creasing. ‘You have not brought your pict-feed?’

I wanted to shrivel up at the implication of my oversight. Some remembrancer, forgetting to bring her recording equipment.

‘Still groggy from translation,’ I muttered.

‘You shall want to be catching this, I expect,’ said the lieutenant.

I looked at the window but all I could see was the local star – slightly fuzzy blue compared to our own sun – and the starfield beyond.

‘We cannot see anything yet,’ said the lieutenant.

‘Why–’

‘I like to come up here after translation, to feel part of the real universe again,’ Khagashu told me. He took one of the data-slates and showed me the screen, on which was a graphic representation of a world, and orbiting above it were the courses of several dozen spacecraft.

‘Another settlement fleet?’ I wasn’t sure what I was being shown. ‘Has there been some kind of mistake?’

‘These are Legiones Astartes vessels, Remembrancer Ares,’ he said, touching a finger to the pad. An icon appeared next to each moving rune, identifying its allegiance.

A skull with bat-like wings to either side. My heart managed to both freeze and thrash simultaneously, blood rushing to my head while a chill prickled across my skin.

‘The Night Lords…’

When the shuttle doors to the flight bay drew back, I wasn’t sure what to expect. Stories of the Night Lords were scarce, leaving much detail to be desired but always possessed of a common theme. They were ruthless, if one was being generous. Amongst the remembrancers there was a rumour that the Night Lords Legion delighted in torture, that they took pride in the terror their attacks sowed.

And, if the fleeting exchanges with others at waystations and orbital platforms was any guide, the Night Lords’ reputation had worsened since the return of their primarch.

So I was expecting some visual sign of this character when I stepped aboard the *Nightfall*, flagship of the Eighth Legion and throne-craft of the darkly-regarded Konrad Curze.

Instead I was struck by the mundanity of the scene. As well as the functional shuttle that had brought me across from the hauler, the bay was home to two gunships, their armoured hulls coloured in the midnight blue of the Legion. Various machines and banks of monitoring equipment lined one wall. I continued to survey my surroundings. One revolution took in the inner doors, the windows of a command cabin and its sole occupant – a bored-looking orderly in plain white robes – and then the great doors that had sealed across the bay.

The hangar was otherwise empty. Certainly devoid of welcome, as much as it was free from grotesque trophies and intimidating decor.

‘I’m getting the command to leave,’ the shuttle pilot called from inside the craft. ‘Are you staying?’

‘Of course,’ I told him. ‘I asked to join the fleet, to see the attack.’

‘You asked to come to the *Nightfall*?’ I couldn’t see the pilot’s face, but his voice betrayed some shock. ‘You want to be here?’

‘Well, I didn’t think I’d get invited to the flagship itself, no…’ It had come as a shock, and I had spent half an hour in my quarters hyperventilating at the thought, but I decided not to share that information. ‘I suppose this is where the other remembrancers are stationed. After all, this is where the Great Crusade is really happening!’

I took a few steps further from the docking ramp so that he could close the shuttle gangway. With a hiss the craft sealed itself.

At the same moment the clank of a heavy lock drew attention to the inner doors. One swung inwards, revealing a chamber beyond the flight deck. The whine of the shuttle jets increased and I realised that the main bay doors

couldn’t open until I had left, unless I wanted to be blown out into the uncaring void.

I hurried through the other door, almost running into the giant figure that stood within. I am considered short by most Terrans, and my head came up to the bottom of his chest-plate. It was blazoned with a winged skull, pale silver against the midnight blue. He wore no helm, his face seemingly proportioned oddly by my perspective, as a child views an adult, all chin with eyes close to the scalp.

It wasn’t simply height that made him imposing, nor the breadth of his chest and shoulders – vaster than any person I had met. His armour buzzed with energy and there was a scent of machine and anger and death about him. My uncle had kept horses on Terra and I remembered being trapped in the stable with them once when I was small, overwhelmed by the sheer size of the beasts and the smell of sweat and manure. It was almost the same feeling, even though I was in a chamber several metres high and quite broad.

The door clanging shut behind me caused me to jump.

‘Come with me,’ he said, turning away. His Nostraman accent caused the words to sound clipped, emphasising that it was a command, not a request.

The sound of his armour was a constant whine in my ears, the thud of boots on the metal deck a steady drumbeat.

I followed without comment or question, cowed by his presence and his attitude. I jogged to maintain pace, though could not escape the feeling that he was checking his stride for my benefit. We travelled by conveyor, heading up, and then a short distance along another deck until I came before double doors of black wood, decorated in gold with the lightning strikes of Terra behind the winged skull of the Night Lords.

A state room of sorts.

‘In here,’ my guide said curtly, gauntleted finger jabbing a runepad set into the wall. He remained just long enough to usher me into the interior before turning away, the door sighing closed at his departure.

My eye was first drawn to an immense window – a row of several windows in fact, together easily fifty metres broad – and the arc of a planet just in view below the *Nightfall*. Flickers of light played over the greenish-blue atmosphere and I saw the flash of lance-light across the void. Trails of torpedoes descended towards the surface, the bright moments of light illuminating the snarling prows of more warships. Plasma plumes from

engines pushing these vessels through their manoeuvres gleamed azure against the dark canopy of space.

My breath came in gasps, my heart trembling at the thought – I was witnessing an actual battle.

‘Imagine being even closer.’

The voice was soft, but startled me all the same. I turned my head towards its source and was amazed to see a man standing at the far end of the window, taller even than the Space Marine that had escorted me. He was clad in ornate war-plate, though it was hard to see as the lumens had been dimmed and most of the light came from the reflected starlight of the planet through the windows.

His face was gaunt and pale, eyes fixed upon me like a predator. Thin lips smiled even as that gaze dissected me with a swift glance.

Konrad Curze.

He stepped towards me, purposeful but not aggressive. While the Space Marine had been a seething mass of contained aggression, there was a detachment about Curze. He directed my gaze to the view with a finger and stood behind me, one hand resting lightly on the back of my neck. There was no movement, no caressing, and I felt oddly safe with the weight of that armoured glove pressing against the curls of my hair.

‘This is what you wanted to see.’ His voice was quiet. I saw his reflection against the darkness of space, the voids of his eyes intent upon the arc of world below us.

I nodded, not daring to speak.

‘Why did you want to see me?’

‘I…’ I thought to step away but his grip tightened ever so slightly, reacting to the intent before it had even crystallised in my mind. I cleared my throat, mouth dry. ‘I told the lieutenant I wanted a combat attachment. I never thought…’

‘I did not say that you asked to be here, I said that you *wanted* to be.’ Curze released his hold and stepped back. My breath exited in a gasp of relief, though I hadn’t realised I had been holding it in. ‘You crave this, Ennylin.’

I turned as he backed away a few steps. The primarch gestured towards the pict-feed in my hand.

‘You have a gift, I expect. A way of capturing moments that few others do?’

‘I see…’ It was hard to explain how my attention was drawn to the innermost thoughts shown in the face and movements of a person. I felt them as much as I saw them. As I had with Khagashu and the Night Lord, now I did so with Curze. ‘Yes, I have a very good eye. I reveal the truth with my footage.’

‘The truth?’ He seemed offended at first but then his smile returned, though there was no warmth in his eyes to match the twist of his lips. ‘The truth is a dangerous thing, Ennylin. Do want to see the Imperial Truth?’

‘Yes, I’ve wanted to see the real crusade ever since I was selected for the remembrancer corps.’

He nodded. A few seconds later the door hissed open again and another Space Marine entered. His face was lean, not without handsome elements, though two scars marked the left side, across brow and cheek, giving the impression of a permanent sneer. I then realised that the lower scar had little to do with his arrogant demeanour – the Night Lord’s lip was curled with scorn, his eyes assessing me. While I had felt the predatory nature of Curze, that had been a cold, practical sense. From this one I noted the hallmarks of unalloyed malice. He was not just a killer, but one that took pleasure in what he did.

‘This is my equerry, Captain Jago Sevatarion,’ said Curze. ‘He will give you what you want.’

I approached the Space Marine, determined not to be daunted by his presence though his calculating gaze made my blood run cold.

‘Thank you, captain,’ I managed to muster before my voice abandoned me.

‘Call me Sevatar,’ he said, eyes flashing with genuine amusement. ‘Let us see if we can find you some war to remember for the Emperor.’

‘Hold on.’

Sevatar’s instruction was not necessary – in fact I think he delighted in the irony of issuing it, given that my hands were clamped so tightly to my restraints that I had lost feeling in my fingertips. The gunship bucked beneath us, buffeted by turbulence and seemingly erratic thrusts of the plasma jets which I assumed were necessary to keep us on some kind of course.

Sevatar stood next to me, armour whining constantly as it adjusted to his ever-changing stance, compensating for the plunging, yawing motion of the Thunderhawk.

‘How. Can. You. Stand. Up?’ It was hard to talk with my teeth gritted so hard.

Sevatar grinned, turning his lower scar into a vicious curl.

‘This is nothing, remembrancer. We’re travelling more slowly for your benefit.’ He slapped a gauntleted hand on the thick restraint. ‘If this was a combat drop your spine would have snapped in two, even with these to hold you.’

Some kind of landing thrusters kicked into life, arresting our descent suddenly. Blood rushed from my head and I felt myself pushed into the bench, despite the support of the restraints. Spots danced across my vision and I felt dizzy.

It lasted a few seconds, I suppose, though it felt longer. I heard the crunch of landing gear on the ground, and we settled hard, jolting me back against the side of the fuselage. Drop harnesses creaked up as they released the squad of Night Lords that had accompanied us. Sevatar pushed on his helm and twisted it with a hiss of closing seals. It was fashioned with a fanged skull over the faceplate, most disconcerting to have looking down at me, two bat-like wings splaying in a crest to imitate the Legion’s badge. From above the bench he drew a long-hafted weapon, its chain-toothed end slightly curved, the teeth themselves glinting in the ruddy light of the gunship’s interior. A weapon as cruel as its bearer.

‘Is it going to be dangerous?’ I asked as he banged a fist against my harness release. The padded bars lifted upwards and the belt seemed to slither back over my waist like a serpent. I stood up, using a support beam to steady myself as I crouched and twisted to pull my pict-feed from the locker underneath.

‘Let us hope so,’ replied the equerry, voice projected with metallic hint by his armoured suit’s vocaliser. ‘We don’t want you getting bored, remembrancer.’

The front of the Thunderhawk opened, letting in dim light and a wall of noise. I hadn’t noticed how the thick hull had insulated us, but as the crack of light grew wider I caught the staccato beat of boltguns, the boom of heavier weapons and the crackle of lascannons. Sounds I had only heard before from recordings, now stark in my ears.

The squad moved out first as the ramp touched down, breaking into a run, the thud of their boots deafening on the metal mesh as they disembarked. I followed beside Sevatar at a more casual pace. The sound intensified and

the air swirled with dust as we stepped from the ramp onto a blasted street.

I lifted the pict-feed and plugged it into my optical receiver, blink-activating the recording device so that everything I looked at would be available to respool and edit later. That was the nature of the videlith, a raw archive as much experiential as visual, my experience and instinct drawing the view to tell the unfolding story as it occurred around me.

'Record what you like, but do not go that way,' said Sevatar, pointing towards smoke-filled sky to our left. Tracer fire and the blossom of half-hidden explosions lit the low clouds, while a pall of blackness spilled from burning towers. 'The primarch would prefer you stay alive.'

He stepped away, but turned as I spoke.

'Where are your other remembrancers?' I asked, suddenly nervous.

'Some of them were bad at listening,' he said. 'Others grew sick of what they saw and left. There are probably a few still around somewhere, but I doubt they are really fit to remember anything these days. War has an unpleasant effect on those that witness but do not wage it.'

'Plenty of remembrancers accompany the Legions without difficulties,' I pointed out. 'Are you threatening me?'

'No, I am not. And those other remembrancers? They did not watch the Night Lords in action…'

He turned away and strode off, leaving me with my disturbed thoughts.

Wherever I was, the fighting had moved on. I swept my eyes around the vicinity, taking in the nearest buildings and the narrow streets between them. In this area they were mostly two or three storeys tall. Most showed signs of damage but were standing, roofs holed or burnt through.

I moved to the closest and rubbed a hand over its grey surface. It was smooth, not at all like stone or brick. Some kind of extruded resin material, I guessed. There was a film of dirt on everything, ash and dust that came away on my fingertips. I held up my hand, looking at the smudges so that the pict-feed would record it. I saw scraps of metallic material in the shattered rubble, and pieces of pinkish glass scattered in places. The interiors were decorated in different ways but with familiar styles – papering on the walls with repeated geometric or natural patterns. Carpets underfoot made from tightly-wound fibres. Pictures…

Pictures of humans, which was no revelation. There had been no hint of xenos since my arrival, but it was strange to see picts of people of all ages,

their friends and families, playing or posing, or sitting with pets.

So normal.

Even more normal than the lives of the colonists waiting in orbit, who would labour long and hard to bring this world back to a semblance of civilisation. Rebuilding it in a vision more fitting to the Imperium, though from what I saw there was little here that would have caused affront to the Emperor of Mankind.

I moved from home to home, and then came upon a communal building. Judging by the small chairs and tables, the crude pictures on the walls, it was likely some kind of tutelarium.

The more distant bark of guns and thunder of artillery came back to me as I passed through a broken wall into a garden. Trees had been turned to ragged stumps, the beds and lawn churned to mud by the passage of the battle. I placed my foot into the gigantic imprint left by a Space Marine boot, like one of the tutelarium children following the footsteps of their teacher.

I was away from the square where Sevatar had deposited me, and I first thought to head back.

My second thought was that he had been insistent I remain in this locale, but there was nothing here to see, not really. Detritus of the crusade, just like the grain haulers and the ferrocrete mixers and other civilian flotsam that washed up after compliance.

This was not what I had come to see, not what Konrad Curze had promised me.

Drawn by the continuing storm of battle, I headed towards the smoke-shrouded towers further on.

Moving from broken shell to shadow to fallen wall, I kept out of sight of the gunships that roared back and forth overhead. I recorded every glance up into the smog-choked heavens, tracking the blue plume of their jets and the yellow flare of heavy bolters pouring fire into their foes beyond the broken towers ahead of me.

Despite venturing into the proscribed area I was still blind to what was really happening, the battle some kilometres distant. Unsure exactly what lay ahead, I steered myself towards one of the taller edifices, its two closest sides pocked with weapon marks, the windows blackened by fire in the upper levels.

A vantage point.

Inside was a mess of broken pipes and cables, steam still spilling from a severed utility connection, soaking the ceiling and walls.

I dared not use any kind of elevator or conveyor and found a stairwell, ascending a dozen floors breathlessly in my quest for a better view.

Recording all of it, every one of the one hundred and forty-four steps, I pushed through an access door from a landing and found myself in what seemed to be some kind of medical facility. At least I guessed as such, from the white tiled walls and shining metal cabinets. In an adjacent room were bunks, bloodied bedding spilling from them, footprints and handprints in crimson on the walls. A familiar impact in the tiles dotted every wall, which I assumed was left by bolter rounds. I pushed my finger into a few of them to give a sense of their scale for the pict-feed.

The windows were covered with slatted blinds and I opened one to gaze across the city.

All was ruin, as far as I could see. The city seemed to stretch forever, a vast conurbation, though not of the scale of a Terran hive or arcology. And there seemed barely a building untouched by destruction.

Yet my thoughts for this were fleeting, my eye drawn to movement far below. I zoomed in my optical implant to see that it was a column of people, dressed in their ragged clothes, escorted by a handful of Night Lords.

The line stretched on along winding streets, its destination out of sight, its origin similarly obscured. Thousands of people being escorted from the dying city.

I kept recording, even as I tried again to follow the column of refugees into the distance.

That’s when I made the connection between their route and the black plumes of smoke. They were being herded towards… pyres? Furnaces?

I almost threw up at the thought and staggered back from the window, sweat prickling my skin as the reaction flooded through me.

This was what Sevatar had warned me against.

I panicked, running back towards the stairs, but through the pulse of my horror-quickened heart I heard the bang of a door opening nearby and voices rising up the stairwell. Heart trying to beat its way out of my ribs, I eased the door open. The footsteps that ascended were booted, but not the armoured thud of Space Marines. The voices, calm and clipped, were accented and not speaking Imperial Gothic. The tone of command told me

that they were not civilians, and they were not idly here.

I pushed out onto the landing, knowing if I stayed in the medicae facility I'd be trapped. Shadows from below betrayed how close the hunters were and I headed upwards, just wanting to put distance between myself and these unknown city dwellers. As horrified as I was by the thought of the Night Lords' actions I could not divorce myself from the notion that these people represented some kind of threat that warranted such drastic action.

The door clanged shut behind me as I ascended the steps, its sound echoing through the stairwell. The shout from below that followed was a mixture of surprise and triumph.

Propelled upwards by overwhelming fear, I ran and kept running until the stairs ended. I slammed through the last door and into a maintenance area, the hum of machinery – miraculous that it was still working, I thought – filled the space. But I saw no doors out, save for a small metal opening that I thought would lead to the roof.

There was no other option; my pursuers were clattering up the stairs.

I hit the roof door with my shoulder and barrelled through, hoping desperately that there would be some other exit once I was there.

I stumbled out into smoke-filled wind, two dozen storeys above the city.

There was another shed-like housing ahead of me, but as I set off towards it the door opened, revealing a man and a woman in dark blue uniforms, rifles in their hands.

Even before I processed this predicament I heard a sharp retort from above. The woman's head exploded, followed a moment later by a second snap and the detonation of her companion's chest.

Rapid drumming sounded behind me and I turned to see more of the locals had spilled up from the machine room below, only to be met by a lethal salvo of fire from above.

The roar of the gunship's jets filtered through my punished senses, accompanied by the continued thunder of the heavy bolters. The crack and whoosh of a launch preceded a blast of heat and noise from the exploding machine chamber, the hot wind almost knocking me from my feet.

The gunship dropped fast, armoured figures spilling from its opening assault ramp in the prow, the squad slamming down onto the roof with bolters ready.

They advanced past me, not giving me a second glance, their weapons occasionally barking as they spied some target in the ruined storey below,

now exposed by the missile of the gunship.

A figure approached me, carrying a long-hafted chain-weapon, his face hidden behind a mask of skull and wings.

‘I told you it was not safe,’ said Sevatar.

I looked at this horrific vision of a warrior and heard the bitter humour in his tone. I recalled his offhand remarks concerning dead remembrancers and a new dread replaced the fear of being slain by the city’s inhabitants.

He crooked a finger, beckoning, and then nodded to the Thunderhawk. Though I knew it was likely I was walking to my death just like the column of people far below, I could do nothing except comply.

The flight took only a minute, probably less, far less dramatic than our atmospheric descent. When the ramp lowered again, Sevatar led me out onto another roof, this time of a fortified building.

Curze was waiting there, standing at a parapet, watching the scene below.

My legs buckled but Sevatar caught me, hoisting me up with his free hand, half-dragging me forwards. He dumped me next to an embrasure, so that I could see out into the stretch of city beyond.

It was like looking into a caldera of a volcano, but as I scoured the bright gleam of flames I saw that in fact it was a series of craters, massive holes broken into the foundations of the city.

‘Geothermal energy,’ said Curze, not looking at me. ‘The whole city draws from it.’

I looked closer and saw the lines of people still, being walked to the end of gantries above the flames before being pushed in, an endless stream of ragdoll silhouettes falling into the glow.

‘We brought our own fuel,’ the primarch continued, finally looking at me.

‘They’re still alive,’ I sobbed.

‘No sense in wasting ammunition,’ Sevatar said from behind me.

I stood up, quaking from fingers to toes, but I let my rage steel my stare as I looked at Curze. He regarded me with one eyebrow raised.

‘I don’t know how, but I will make sure that this gets out,’ I told him tapping the recorder box of my pict-feed.

‘I’ll help you,’ said the primarch with a smile. He glanced at Sevatar and then dismissed the equerry with a flick of the head. ‘I *wanted* you to see this. I was waiting for the area to be fully secure, as I’m sure you understand. I would hate myself if something unfortunate happened to you before you could take your recordings back to Terra.’

‘Why?’ I asked the question, though I did not really want an answer, the single word encompassing so much confusion and so broad a horror I could not bring myself to think about it.

‘Why?’ He leaned closer. ‘Are you still recording?’

I nodded dumbly. His face almost filled my vision.

‘Good. This is my message to the lords and ladies of Terra. You wanted to see the Great Crusade, Ennylin.’ He straightened and opened his arms in an expansive gesture. ‘This is it! Those great people of the Throneworld need to see this. Those that would wage war but do not fight it need to remember what it is they have unleashed. This is compliance, is it not? There will be no resistance when we have finished.’

He stepped away.

‘And you will send this not only to Terra, but to me.’ He looked over his shoulder, piercing me with his ebon gaze. ‘Sights such as this will be broadcast to those that would refuse the Night Lords in the future. Let them make an informed decision when they choose to refuse us. How many lives will I save? How many of the Emperor’s servants and my loyal legionaries will live because the enemy capitulates? When they see the price of non-compliance, who would dare withstand us?’

‘You are…’ I could not bring myself to utter the word, the realisation of it was too horrible. One of the Emperor’s primarchs was clearly insane, and the implications of that created a freezing void in my gut. I looked at him and saw a man entirely at ease with himself. He spoke with fluid gestures, no hesitation or inflection to betray the slightest guilt.

‘My father already knows this.’ He directed me to look again at the mass burning and continued to speak. Tears clouded the view and I wiped them away out of instinct, not wanting to spoil the recording quality. ‘The path of the righteous. The Emperor set me upon this course and I hear no condemnation from Him.

‘This is the conqueror’s truth. The weak pretend there is compromise, that morality gives rise to the grey of acceptance and equivocation. They are misguided. I do the Emperor’s work here. Life is binary. Truth or lie. Guilt or innocence.’

His shadow fell upon me and I looked up into his face, seeing a demigod of death looming over me. His gaze did not move towards me, but up to the skies, as though seeing something else entirely.

‘Compliance, or death.’

OceanofPDF.com

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Chris Wraight** is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Warhawk*, *Scars* and *The Path of Heaven*, the Primarchs novels *Leman Russ: The Great Wolf* and *Jaghatai Khan: Warhawk of Chogoris*, the novellas *Brotherhood of the Storm*, *Wolf King* and *Valdor: Birth of the Imperium*, and the audio drama *The Sigillite*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written *The Helwinter Gate*, *The Lords of Silence*, *Vaults of Terra: The Carrion Throne*, *Vaults of Terra: The Hollow Mountain*, *Watchers of the Throne: The Emperor's Legion*, *Watchers of the Throne: The Regent's Shadow* and many more. Additionally, he has many Warhammer novels to his name, and the Warhammer Crime novel *Bloodlines*. Chris lives and works in Bradford-on-Avon, in south-west England.

**L J Goulding** is the author of the Horus Heresy audio drama *The Heart of the Pharos*, while for Space Marine Battles he has written the novel *Slaughter at Giant's Coffin* and the audio drama *Mortarion's Heart*. His other Warhammer fiction includes 'The Great Maw' and 'Kaldor Draigo: Knight of Titan', and he has continued to explore the dark legacy of Sotha in 'The Aegidan Oath' and *Scythes of the Emperor: Daedalus*. He lives and works in the US.

**Guy Haley** is the author of the Siege of Terra novel *The Lost and the Damned*, as well as the Horus Heresy novels *Titandeath*, *Wolfsbane* and *Pharos*, and the Primarchs novels *Konrad Curze: The Night Haunter*, *Corax: Lord of Shadows* and *Perturabo: The Hammer of Olympia*. He has also written many Warhammer 40,000 novels, including the first book in the Dawn of Fire series, *Avenging Son*, as well as *Belisarius Cawl: The Great Work*, *Dark Imperium*, *Dark Imperium: Plague War*, *The Devastation of Baal*, *Dante*, *Darkness in the Blood* and *Astorath: Angel of Mercy*. He has also written stories set in the Age of Sigmar, included in *War Storm*, *Ghal Maraz* and *Call of*

*Archaon*. He lives in Yorkshire with his wife and son.

**James Swallow** is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Fear to Tread* and *Nemesis*, which both reached the New York Times bestseller lists. Also for the Horus Heresy, he has written *The Flight of the Eisenstein*, *The Buried Dagger* and a series of audio dramas featuring the character Nathaniel Garro, the prose versions of which have now been collected into the anthology *Garro*. For Warhammer 40,000, he is best known for his four Blood Angels novels, the audio drama *Heart of Rage*, and his two Sisters of Battle novels. His short fiction has appeared in *Legends of the Space Marines* and *Tales of Heresy*.

**Graham McNeill** has written many Horus Heresy novels, including *The Crimson King*, *Vengeful Spirit* and his New York Times bestsellers *A Thousand Sons* and the novella *The Reflection Crack'd*, which featured in The Primarchs anthology. Graham's Ultramarines series, featuring Captain Uriel Ventris, is now six novels long, and has close links to his Iron Warriors stories, the novel *Storm of Iron* being a perennial favourite with Black Library fans. He has also written the Forges of Mars trilogy, featuring the Adeptus Mechanicus, and the Warhammer Horror novella *The Colonel's Monograph*. For Warhammer, he has written the Warhammer Chronicles trilogy *The Legend of Sigmar*, the second volume of which won the 2010 David Gemmell Legend Award.

**David Guymer**'s work for Warhammer Age of Sigmar includes the novels *Hamilcar: Champion of the Gods* and *The Court of the Blind King*, the audio dramas *The Beasts of Cartha*, *Fist of Mork, Fist of Gork*, *Great Red* and *Only the Faithful*. He is also the author of the Gotrek & Felix novels *Slayer*, *Kinslayer* and *City of the Damned* and the Gotrek audio dramas *Realmslayer* and *Realmslayer: Blood of the Old World*. For The Horus Heresy he has written the novella *Dreadwing*, the Primarchs novel *Ferrus Manus: Gorgon of Medusa*, and for Warhammer 40,000 *The Eye of Medusa*, *The Voice of Mars* and the two Beast Arises novels *Echoes of the Long War* and *The Last Son of Dorn*. He is a freelance writer and occasional scientist based in the East Riding, and was a finalist in the 2014 David Gemmell Awards for his novel *Headtaker*.

**Mike Brooks** is a science fiction and fantasy author who lives in Nottingham, UK. His work for Black Library includes the Warhammer 40,000 novel *Rites of Passage*, the Necromunda novella *Wanted: Dead*, and various short stories. When not writing, he plays guitar and sings in a punk band, and DJs wherever anyone will tolerate him.

**Aaron Dembski-Bowden** is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *The Master of Mankind*, *Betrayer* and *The First Heretic*, as well as the novella *Aurelian* and the audio drama *Butcher's Nails*, for the same series. He has also written the Warhammer 40,000 novel *Spear of the Emperor*, the popular Night Lords series, the Space Marine Battles book *Armageddon*, the novels *The Talon of Horus* and *Black Legion*, the Grey Knights novel *The Emperor's Gift* and numerous short stories. He lives and works in Northern Ireland.

**Dan Abnett** has written over fifty novels, including *Anarch*, the latest instalment in the acclaimed Gaunt's Ghosts series. He has also written the Ravenor, Eisenhorn and Bequin books, the most recent of which is *Penitent*. For the Horus Heresy, he is the author of the Siege of Terra novel *Saturnine*, as well as *Horus Rising*, *Legion*, *The Unremembered Empire*, *Know No Fear* and *Prospero Burns*, the last two of which were both *New York Times* bestsellers. He also scripted *Macragge's Honour*, the first Horus Heresy graphic novel, as well as numerous Black Library audio dramas. Many of his short stories have been collected into the volume *Lord of the Dark Millennium*. He lives and works in Maidstone, Kent.

**David Annandale** is the author of the Warhammer Horror novel *The House of Night and Chain* and the novella *The Faith and the Flesh*, which features in the portmanteau *The Wicked and the Damned*. His work for the Horus Heresy series includes the novels *Ruinstorm* and *The Damnation of Pythos*, and the Primarchs novels *Roboute Guilliman: Lord of Ultramar* and *Vulkan: Lord of Drakes*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written *Ephrael Stern: The Heretic Saint*, *Warlord: Fury of the God-Machine*, the Yarrick series, and several stories involving the Grey Knights, as well as titles for The Beast Arises and the Space Marine Battles series. For Warhammer Age of Sigmar he has written *Neferata: Mortarch of Blood* and *Neferata: The*

*Dominion of Bones*. David lectures at a Canadian university, on subjects ranging from English literature to horror films and video games.

**Gav Thorpe** is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *The First Wall*, *Deliverance Lost*, *Angels of Caliban* and *Corax*, as well as the novella *The Lion*, which formed part of the *New York Times* bestselling collection *The Primarchs*, and several audio dramas. He has written many novels for Warhammer 40,000, including *Indomitus*, *Ashes of Prospero*, *Imperator: Wrath of the Omnissiah* and the Last Chancers series, including the most recent title, *The Last Chancers: Armageddon Saint*. He also wrote the Rise of the Ynnari novels *Ghost Warrior* and *Wild Rider*, the *Path of the Eldar* and *Legacy of Caliban* trilogies, and two volumes in The Beast Arises series. For Warhammer, Gav has penned the End Times novel *The Curse of Khaine*, the Warhammer Chronicles omnibus *The Sundering*, and, for Age of Sigmar, *The Red Feast*. In 2017, Gav won the David Gemmell Legend Award for his novel *Warbeast*. He lives and works in Nottingham.

*OceanofPDF.com*

**An extract from *The Solar War*.**

*OceanofPDF.com*

*Terra*

On the first of Primus the sirens rang across Terra.

On the myriad worlds conquered and ruled by the Imperium of Man, they talked of year divisions, of time sliced into a thousand equal slivers. First division, second division, third, and so on, without variation or character, until the weight of counting reached a thousand, and one year tipped over into the next. On worlds of endless night or blinding days, a year was the same. In an empire spanning a galaxy, anything else would have been meaningless.

0000014.M31 was how surviving records would mark the first moment of that day, stamped and corrected for temporal accuracy, standardised and stripped of any meaning. But, here, on the world whose night and day and seasons had given mankind its concept of time, the old counting still meant something and so did the moment that one year died and another was born: the Feast of Two Faces, the Day of New Light, the Renewal – on and on went its names. But for longer than memory it had been the first of Primus, firstborn of the three hundred and sixty-five days that would follow, a day of hope and new beginnings.

The turning of that year began with snow on the northern battlements of the Imperial Palace, where three brother demigods watched the night skies above. It began with the dawn light and icy chill reaching into a tower-top chamber and stirring the painted cards dealt by a man who was older than any knew. It began with the sirens calling out, one at first, high on the Palace spires, before the cry was picked up by others, on and on across the turning globe. The sound echoed through the mountain-sized space ports and rasped from vox-horns in the deep strata of the Atlantean Hives.

On and on it went, stilling the hands of people as they ate and worked.

They looked up. In caves beneath the earth, and hive vaults, and under the smog drifts, they looked up. Of those that could see the sky, a few thought they could make out new stars amongst the firmament and froze at the promise of each pinprick of light: a promise of fire and ash and an age of loss. And with the sound of sirens, fear spread, unnamed but still spoken.

'He is here,' they said.

*Prison ship* Aeacus, *Uranus high orbit*

*'I understand you have a story…' she said. The wolf stood before her, the fur of its back silver beneath the moonlight. 'A particularly entertaining one. I'd like to remember it, for posterity.'*

*The wolf turned, its teeth a smile of sorrow.*

*'Which story?'*

*'Horus killing the Emperor.'*

Mersadie Oliton woke from the memory-dream with sweat on her face. She breathed, and pulled the blanket over her from where it had slipped onto the floor. The air was cool and dank in the cell, scented with the tang of air that had been exhaled too much. She blinked for a second. Something was different. She reached out a hand and touched the metal wall. Moisture clung to the rivets and rust scabs. The thrum of the ship's engines had gone. Wherever they were, they were stationary in the void.

She let her hand drop and let out a breath. The tatters of the memory-dream still clung to her eyelids. She focused, trying to pull back the threads of the dream even as they slid into darkness.

'I must remember…' she said to herself.

'The prisoner will stand and face the wall.' The voice boomed out of the speaker set above the cell door.

She stood instinctively. She wore a grey jumpsuit, worn and faded. She put her hands on the wall, fingers splayed. The door unlocked with a clang, and footsteps sounded on the grated floor. The guard would be one just like the rest: crimson-clad and silver-masked, the humanity in its voice concealed by vox distortion. All the gaolers were the same, as constant as the ticking of a clock that never struck the hour.

Small spaces, locked doors, questions and suspicions – such had been her world for the seven years since she had come back to the Solar System. That was the price for what she had seen, for what she remembered. She

had been a remembrancer, one of the thousands of artists, writers and scholars sent out to witness the Great Crusade as it brought the light of reason to a reunited humanity. That had been her purpose: to see, to remember. Like many clear purposes and shining futures, it had not worked out that way.

She heard the footsteps stop behind her, and knew the guard would be placing a bowl of water and a fresh jumpsuit on the floor.

'Where are we?' she asked, hearing the question come from her mouth before she could stop it.

Silence.

She waited. There would not be a punishment for her asking, no beatings, no withdrawal of food or humiliation – that was not how this imprisonment worked. The punishment was silence. She had no doubt that other, more visceral methods were used on other prisoners – she had heard the screams. But for her there had only been silence. Seven years of silence. They did not need to ask her questions, after all. They had taken the memory spools out of her skull, and those recordings would have told them everything they wanted and more.

'We are still in the void, aren't we,' she said, still facing the wall. 'The engine vibrations have stopped, you see. No way of missing it if you have spent any time on ships… I spent time on a warship once. You never lose the sense of it.' She paused, waiting for a response, even if it was just the sound of retreating footsteps and the door shutting.

Silence again.

That was strange. She had tried talking to guards in the early years, and their response had been to leave her without reply. After a while, that had felt worse than if they had struck a whip across her back. They had never beaten her, though, or even touched her. Even when they opened her skull to remove the memory spools, they had sedated her, as though that made the violation that followed more acceptable.

She supposed that such small mercies had to do with Qruze or Loken. The former Luna Wolves had watched over her as much as they could. But that had still left her a prisoner of the greatest and darkest prison in the Imperium. Loken had said that he would free her, but she had refused. Even while it pained her, she understood why she had to remain locked up. How could she not? After all, had she not seen the true face of the enemy? Four years of life on the *Vengeful Spirit* amongst the Sons of Horus, in the

shadow of their father, who now had set the galaxy alight with civil war. What other reward could there be for remembering those days? A galaxy shrunk to silence and plasteel walls, with only dreams and memories to speak to her.

She had begun to dream memories after a few months, dreams of her home on Terra, of the sunlight shattering across the edge of the Arcus orbital plate, her mother laughing and calling after her as she ran through the hydro-gardens. And she had dreamed of her time amongst the Luna Wolves, and the Sons of Horus, of people now long dead. She had asked for parchment and pen, but none had been given to her. She had gone back to the old games her mind-nurse had taught her, ways of tucking memories away when she woke from sleep, ways of remembering the past even as it fled into the distance. In the silence, she had found that memories and dreams were all she had, all she was.

'Are we still somewhere in the Solar System?' she asked, and twitched her neck to look behind her. Why was she still talking? But then why had the guard not left? 'The ship doesn't feel like it's preparing for translation. Where are we?'

They had come for her in her cell on the Nameless Fortress three nights ago. They had loaded her into a box barely big enough to stand upright in. She had felt the box judder and sway as machines had lifted it and her. They had let her out into this cell, and she had recognised the vibration of a void-ship under power. It had been comforting at first, but her dreams had not been, and now the silence of this moment was feeling stranger with each elongating second.

'Why was I taken away from the fortress?' she asked. 'Where am I going?'

'Where we all wish we could go, Mistress Oliton,' said Garviel Loken. She whirled, and the end of her cell was gone and a wolf was rising from a pool of dark water beneath the moon. Its eyes were black spheres, and its bared-teeth grin was wide as it spoke. 'You are going home.'

In the dark of her cell, Mersadie Oliton woke to silence and lay still, waiting for the dream to fade or for herself to wake again.

*Strike Frigate* Lachrymae, *Trans-Plutonian Gulf*

The first ship of the onslaught died as it breached the veil of reality. Streams of plasma reached out from gun platforms. White fire smashed into the

ship's prow. Lightning and glowing ectoplasm streamed behind its hull. Macro shells detonated amongst the molten wounds already cut into its skin. Turrets and spires sheared from its bulk. Towers broke from its spine. It kept coming even as its bows were torn apart. The burning wreck struck the first of the mines scattered across the dark. Explosions burst around it. The front portion of the ship sheared from the back. Prow and gun decks hinged down. Atmosphere vented from the exposed interior. Debris scattered, burning for an eye-blink before the flames ate the air trapped in the wreckage.

'Ship kill,' called a sensor adept from across the bridge of the *Lachrymae*.

Sigismund watched the intruder's death as it spread across the pict screens above the command dais. He was armoured, his sword chained to his wrist and resting point down on the deck at his feet. He did not blink or move as the dying ship tumbled across his sight. In the still depths of his mind he heard the words that had brought him to this place and time.

*'You must choose where to stand. By the words of your duty, or by your father's side at the end.'*

Around him the command crew was silent. Eyes fixed on instruments and screens. This was the beginning of the moment they had all known would end the years of waiting. Some, perhaps, had thought or hoped that it would never come. But here it was, marked with fire.

*I chose, Keeler,* he thought, and in his mind, he heard again the words that Dorn had spoken in judgement of that choice.

*'You will continue in rank and position as you have, and you will never speak to any other of this. The Legion and the Imperium will not know of my judgement. Your duty will be to never let your weakness taint those who have more strength and honour than you.'*

*'As you will, father.'*

*'I am not your father!' roared Dorn, his anger suddenly filling the air, his face swallowed by dusk shadows. 'You are not my son,' he said quietly. 'And no matter what your future holds, you never will be.'*

'I chose,' he whispered to himself, 'and here I stand at the end.'

The fire from the dead warship spread across the displays.

'*If they come at us like this, the slaughter will barely be worth the sweat,*' growled Fafnir Rann.

'*They will not give us that luxury,*' replied Boreas from further back on the platform. Sigismund did not look around at where the holo-projections of

the Assault captain or his lieutenant hovered at his shoulders. Each of them stood on the command deck of one of the *Lachrymae*'s sister ships.

Rann wore void-hardened Mark III armour, with reinforcing studs bonded to his shins and left shoulder. The scars of battles fought here, at the edge of the system, ran beneath the fresh yellow lacquer. His tall boarding shield hung in his right hand, the twin axes mag-locked to its back echoed in the heraldry painted on the shield's face. Sigismund imagined he could see the warped smile on Rann's face as he turned to Boreas and shrugged.

The holo-image of the First Lieutenant of the Templars did not move. Unhelmed, his face was a single twisted scar, and if there was any emotion beyond cold fury behind his eyes, Sigismund could not see it. Boreas' sword of office stood almost as tall as he did, its guard the cross of the Templars, its blade etched with the names of the dead.

'All ships, stand by,' said Sigismund softly, and heard the orders ripple out.

The vibration in the deck rose in pitch. The dull ache that had been building in his skull for the last hours was sharpening. He noticed one of the human deck crew shiver and wipe a hand across a bead of blood forming in her nose.

'Hold to our oaths and the strength of our purpose,' he called.

Whispers buzzed at the edge of his thoughts, razor tips scratching over metal. They had needed to sedate every astropath in the fleet two hours before, as a wave of psychic pressure had sent them babbling and screaming. It had become more intense with every passing moment, and it presaged one thing: it was the bow wave of a truly vast armada coming through the warp, bearing down on the Solar System like a storm front. Horus and the traitors were coming.

'Etheric surge detected!' shouted a sensor officer.

'*Here it comes,*' said Rann, and brought his fist to his chest. '*Honour and death.*'

'*For the primarch and Terra,*' said Boreas.

'For our oaths,' said Sigismund. The images of his two brothers blinked out.

He reached down and pulled his own helm from his belt and locked it in place over his head. 'May my strength be equal to this moment,' he said to himself as the helm display lit in his eyes. The data of the battle sphere overlaid his sight.

The Plutonian Gulf glittered with weapon platforms, torpedo shoals and

mine drifts. Together they formed a great web, tens of thousands of kilometres deep, stretching from the very edge of night to the orbits of Pluto itself. Ships glinted amongst the defences: fast gun-sloops and monitor ships that were little more than engines and weaponry. They had been built in the orbital forges of Luna, Jupiter and Uranus and dragged to the edge of the sun's light. Alongside them lay the fleet of the First Sphere: hundreds of warships, all in motion. And beyond the warships, the moons of Pluto waited. Studded with weapons and hollow with tunnels, each was a fortress that could have stood against a fleet.

The sheet of stars erupted with lightning. Rents opened in the vacuum. Nauseating colours and dazzling light poured out as ship after ship surged from nothing into being. Tens, and then hundreds. The sensor servitors in the *Lachrymae* twitched and gabbled as targets multiplied faster than they could vocalise updates.

Mines detonated, explosions leaping from one to another in chains that stretched across the dark. Gun platforms opened up. Macro shells, rockets and plasma struck metal and stone, bored in and exploded. Ships died even as they tasted reality, armour stripped by fire, guts spilled into the dark. In the first ten seconds, over a hundred vessels burned to wreckage. Most had been former warships of the Imperial Army, crewed by humans who had given their oath to Horus and been rewarded with the honour of being the first to draw their blades in this battle. They died for that honour, burning too in the ruin of their ships, hulls shredded around them.

But they kept coming.

Ship after ship, tearing reality like flags waving in front of a gun-line. The first Legiones Astartes warship surfaced from the warp. It was named the *Erinyes*, and it was a bombardment galleon of the IV Legion: a five-kilometre-long hull wrapped around a trio of nova cannon barrels. She loosed all three shots as the void kissed her skin. Each nova cannon shell was the size of a Battle Titan, its core filled with unstable plasma. They had no target, but they needed none. They ran straight into the heart of the defences and exploded with the force and light of a star's birth. Gun platforms vanished. Mines lit off in spheres of red flame. Fire poured from the defences as more ships rammed past the debris of their dead kin.

The light of the blaze flooded through the *Lachrymae*'s screens and viewports. Sigismund's helm display dimmed.

'Engage,' he said, and the *Lachrymae* leapt forwards. Twenty strike

cruisers and fast destroyers followed in tight formation. Lance fire speared out from them, slicing into ships as they cut across the front of the enemy fleet. Plumes of ghost-light and ectoplasm stretched like arms through the dark as more ships punched through from the warp.

A backwash of etheric lightning struck the Imperial Fists cruiser *Solar Son.* It spun, its hull cracking and crumpling as the laws of reality went into flux. The *Lachrymae* and its sisters did not pause but plunged on. They had one purpose in this moment: to kill as many of the enemy as possible while they clawed from the warp onto the shore of reality. For the moment, the Imperial Fists' prey was vulnerable, and the First Sphere fleet were predators.

The *Lachrymae*'s guns found the skin of the gun-barge *Fire Oath* before it could light its void shields. Macro shells punched through gun decks and exploded. Munitions cooked off in loading hoists. The *Fire Oath*'s hull bulged, then burst. Building-sized pieces of hull scythed out, caught the flank of a battle cruiser as it emerged from the warp and tore its command castle from its back. The warp breach it had emerged from pulsed and swallowed the wreckage.

'Hold,' called Sigismund, his voice passing through the ships of his command via crackling vox-link. 'For our oaths, we hold true.'

The *Lachrymae* sliced on while its mortal crew screamed as ghosts and nightmares flooded their sight. Reality in the battle sphere was now little more than tattered scraps blowing in the night. The *Lachrymae* rolled, her guns finding enemy after enemy. But for each one that died, another three came from the warp.

Deadfall torpedoes set in the void triggered and speared forwards. Carcasses of ships split and burned. Pluto's fortress-moons found their range to the first of the invaders and spoke. Newly lit void shields flashed as they collapsed. Volleys answered. The reserve fleets holding close to the moons powered forwards and began to kill and die. The light of battle swelled, blurring with the glow of thousands of warp transitions, until which side was firing and which was burning was lost in a rippling blaze tens of thousands of kilometres across. Hours later, the light of that fire would glimmer in the night above the battlements of the Imperial Palace as the sirens called and alarums rang to tell that Horus had, at last, brought his war to the birth system of humanity.

**Click here to buy *The Solar War*.**

*OceanofPDF.com*

**A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION**

‘Prince of Blood’ first published in *Sons of the Emperor: An Anthology* in 2018
‘Child of Chaos’ first published in *Black Library Events Anthology 2018/2019* in 2018
‘Grandfather’s Gift’ first published in 2017
‘Lantern’s Light’ first published in *Black Library Celebration 2019* in 2019
‘Lupus Daemonis’ first published in *Blood of the Emperor: An Anthology* in 2021
‘The Sixth Cult of the Denied’ first published in *Blood of the Emperor: An Anthology* in 2021
‘Council of Truth’ first published in *Blood of the Emperor: An Anthology* in 2021
‘Terminus’ first published in *Blood of the Emperor: An Anthology* in 2021
‘The Abyssal Edge’ first published in *Sons of the Emperor: An Anthology* in 2018
‘The Emperor’s Architect’ first published in *Sons of the Emperor: An Anthology* in 2018
‘The Ancient Awaits’ first published in *Sons of the Emperor: An Anthology* in 2018
‘Misbegotten’ first published in *Sons of the Emperor: An Anthology* in 2018
‘The Verdict of the Scythe’ first published in *Scions of the Emperor: An Anthology* in 2019
‘The Conqueror’s Truth’ first published in *Scions of the Emperor: An Anthology* in 2019
This eBook edition published in 2021 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Represented by: Games Workshop Limited – Irish branch, Unit 3, Lower Liffey Street, Dublin 1,D01 K199, Ireland.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.

The Horus Heresy: Traitorous Scions © Copyright Games Workshop Limited 2021. The Horus Heresy: Traitorous Scions, GW, Games

Workshop, Black Library, The Horus Heresy, The Horus Heresy Eye logo, Space Marine, 40K, Warhammer, Warhammer 40,000, the 'Aquila' Double-headed Eagle logo, and all associated logos, illustrations, images, names, creatures, races, vehicles, locations, weapons, characters, and the distinctive likenesses thereof, are either ® or TM, and/or © Games Workshop Limited, variably registered around the world.
All Rights Reserved.

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-80407-137-3

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to real people or incidents is purely coincidental.

*OceanofPDF.com*